hey look, the sky's falling apart

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by saffroncassis

Summary

The facts are this: Chuuya is a compassionate person. He cares too much and too fiercely. He gets attached easily and is undyingly loyal to the people around him. He also happens to be the strongest ability user this side of Japan since the turn of the century.

At age 16, Chuuya defects from the Port Mafia and drags his partner with him not so much kicking and screaming as silently begrudging, and the rest follow suit in time.

between a rock and a hard place

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai Osamu's past is an open secret among the Port Mafia. His present, known among the upper and older echelons of it. The former isn't difficult to discern, considering the way he conducts himself and the morbid way he speaks, but most don't dare say it aloud.

The knowledge of the latter, however, is present in the whispers that occur whenever he passes by wearing more bandages than normal, in Hirotsu's refusal to look at the casts that adorn his arms and legs near constantly, in Kouyou's sharp inhales whenever there are new bruises on his face and around his neck.

An open secret, meaning it's not difficult at all to figure out what's going on, but no one is willing to speak of or against it. There are consequences to loose lips, after all. And who would stand up for someone more weapon than human?

Chuuya doesn't realize for a long while, which may or may not have been a purposeful manipulation on Dazai's part. It takes 8 months of partnership to figure it out, which is over a year after they first meet, and means they are both 16 and Chuuya is still volatile and reeling from the Dragon Head Conflict.

At this point they've established what aren't quite traditions but might be classified as easy habits. After certain missions, where they don't get enough information or they wreck destruction a bit too obviously, the two write overlong debriefs together. Better to endure punishment and shame by each other's sides than alone, no matter how they bicker. These are some of the few times Dazai will sit and do paperwork without complaining and pushing it on Chuuya, and his visible eye is always duller than usual. It lacks luster just as his complexion lacks life, riddled with darkness the same way his skin is riddled with yellow-greens and blue-blacks.

Mori drops in on them where they sit on the sterile beds of his clinic, one day. To retrieve some medicine, presumably, but the way he lingers around them means he's really monitoring. He stands behind Dazai and rests a hand on his shoulder while he leans over to see the computer screen, and something in Dazai's face shifts. Maybe it's the late night exhaustion that prevents him from covering up his expression thoroughly, but his jaw goes tight and his brows tilt up with exhaustion. He looks resigned, overwhelmed, and even a little scared.

Mori levers himself back up and Dazai's expression drops blank again, but Chuuya can't get the image of it out of his mind, aberration overlaid atop the one there is now.

The next day he asks Kouyou about it, in as hushed and delicate a tone as he can, and the way she doesn't meet his eyes is answer enough. When she finally speaks, it does no more than further settle the stone of disgust and anger in his stomach.

The next week, Chuuya comes to a decision.

"Hey," Chuuya says.

Dazai hums in acknowledgment. His fingers press to the pulse point of a clammy hand. He turns it over by the wrist and exams the nails for signs of struggle. It's all procedural, something Chuuya always gladly lets slip to his partner. The stench of a corpse is strong, even more so in the heat, and Chuuya turns nauseous far easier than his partner, who on most days seemingly cannot be phased by anything.

At this little scene, of just the two of them in this alley interrogating a cadaver about its killer, the sun glares down at them like a watchdog. There are no mafia members within hearing distance, or even observing distance, but the words that haven't left his throat still feel so scrutinized.

The pause is prominent enough that Dazai speaks again. "What, did you find something useful?" He twists his head around to lock eyes, folding one elbow over his knees and setting the other hand on the concrete for balance.

Chuuya stares at the new cotton pad taped under Dazai's jaw, the dark circles under his visible eye, the dishevelment of his dark hair, and walks forward. His shadow casts Dazai in cooling darkness momentarily, turning everything about him gray, and it's such an unsettlingly fitting look for someone who's supposed to be his own age, that Chuuya lurches down to a crouch and lets the light wash over his partner again.

"Why the long face, shortstack; you lose something?"

They're almost nose to nose, this way. The sun brings out the flecks of gold in Dazai's brown-black eye.

Chuuya focuses on it again, reaches for the knee-deep pool of empathy and anger and lets it rise high enough to engulf him. It may not quite be protectiveness but— This isn't right. This isn't *right*.

He's already lost so many friends during the conflict, the wounds from each and every loss still fresh, and he might have been helpless to do anything at the time but now the opportunity is staring him right in the face. To hell if he's going to let it all go to waste.

"I'm leaving."

"Oh?" Dazai raises his eyebrows. "So soon after we got here? As out of character as this is, I don't think Mori- *san* finds you endearing enough to let you ignore a mission."

"I'm leaving everything," he clarifies, and it takes barely a second for understanding to unmask Dazai's face.

"He'll find you."

"Only if he wants to. And even if he does, I can take care of anyone he sends."

"But you can't defect. Kouyou-nee would be heartbroken."

"She wouldn't, because she knows it's for the better."

"For the better?" Dazai asks. There's almost a laugh in his voice. "And why, pray tell, would she think it makes this for the better?"

Chuuya takes a moment to inhale, and let the courage build in a wave before he lets it tide out over his tongue. “Because I’m taking you with me.”

The reaction is immediate. Dazai doesn’t even try to hide the surprise that overtakes his features. His shoulders and jaw go slack, like a puppet whose strings are cut, hands held loose and fingers held even looser. His lips part in unspoken words and his eyebrow rises up, up, up to the sky. There’s a ring of white around his iris, wide eye then framed by thick lashes.

“*Why*,” he asks finally, with so much quiet disbelief in the voice it actually hurts like a real, solid blade.

“Because you need to leave. This place is bad for you, so I’m getting you out.”

Dazai is stunned silent again, and this might be the most lost Chuuya’s ever seen him. Still lax, Dazai gathers himself enough to say, “It doesn’t matter if you think it's bad for me. Chuuya, it doesn’t matter if anyone thinks it’s bad for me, because *I don’t care* what it is for me.”

And doesn’t that just twist the blade in deeper? “Well, it matters to me, because I’m a regular fucking human being with emotions, so I’m getting you out of here.”

Dazai’s gaze finally falls away and to the ground. There’s what might even be frustration building in the lines of his eyebrows. “You can’t take me if I don’t care. Just drop this, and let’s finish the mission.”

Chuuya reaches out a hand. It hovers in the air under Dazai’s jaw, thumb a hair’s breadth away from the cotton pad there, fingertips skimmed by split ends. He grabs Dazai’s collar.

“I’m leaving, no matter what,” he says, trying to force understanding like a spike through Dazai’s head with his words. “I can’t fucking stay here any longer knowing what the person that I pledged my loyalty to does to you. So you should choose whether you want to be partnerless and left to *him* and all of the shit he puts you through constantly, or whether you want to take this lifeline and let me pull you up.”

Dazai’s eyes are dead again. There’s perspiration sliding down his neck, wetting his collar and Chuuya’s knuckles where they brush his skin.

Another painfully long moment, and then all the air leaves Dazai’s chest. He ducks his head and rests it on Chuuya’s shoulder, his brown hair tickling tendon, under-ear, sweeping against cheek and engulfing gaze when Chuuya turns to him.

“You’re more self-righteous than I thought, sheepdog. Do you think you’re some sort of savior? That you can just spit out some words and *fix* me, when I’ve always been like this? You’re horrid. A stubborn, loyal, fool.”

Chuuya tightens his grip on Dazai’s shirt collar and presses his knuckles into the other’s neck, hard enough to hurt. “Just tell me that’s a yes, jackass.”

Dazai sinks further into Chuuya. “I hate you. Do whatever you please.”

They’re gone by next week. It’s not bombastically, surprising enough for Double Black.

Chuuya leaves Kouyou a note, throws a few of his things into a backpack, and uses his ability to crush the lock of her safe and steal some cash. He knows she'll understand, and it's not comparable to the estate she inhabits anyway.

He swoops Dazai away from his room within the Port Mafia headquarters, who makes the task no easier by having prepared his own things or settled any of his own matters. They fly out and away, Chuuya holding Dazai aloft by carefully gripping the back of his coat without touching skin, and in a few hours they are settled at a hotel at the outskirts of Yokohama.

Dazai's hands are shaking when they land. His skin has a deathly pallor, ghost white and cracked at the edges of his mouth, and Chuuya realizes he must have been nervous even in the days leading up to this.

"Do you need to throw up?" He asks, opening the door to the cramped bathroom.

Dazai shakes his head, just sits on the edge of one of the twin beds and laces his hands tightly together. Chuuya sits next to him through the whole night, unspeaking.

They rest in the morning.

Chuuya gets a part-time job at a family restaurant to make some money until they can figure out what to do. He poses as a high school student, makes small talk with the other employees, and brings to their temporary home the meals they give him as part of his pay. On the days that Dazai feels up to it, he'll visit and bother him while he's working.

On the days Dazai doesn't feel up to it, Chuuya will open the door to their hotel room of the week, to find him wrapping bandages around and around his arms and legs and torso. Sometimes, Chuuya helps.

"See," Dazai says with a hint of bitterness. "Mori's not here, and I'm still hurt. I told you that you can't just say you'll save me and have everything go your way."

"I'm not delusional," Chuuya mutters. He knows better than anyone how futile it is to expect to be able to save any number of people completely. First his failure with the Sheep, then his subordinates that died in vain during the Dragon Head Conflict. But Dazai isn't an entire group of people for Chuuya to protect and be in charge of. He's one person, and if all Chuuya can do is keep him fed and help stitch him back together every night, he'll count that a success.

"You may not be able to stop this right now," he says, and stares firmly at Dazai's scarred arm while he works, rolling gauze over the ointment he'd just spread on. He remains unblinking for long enough that the air burns his eyes. "But I know it's better now. No one's breaking your fucking arms anymore, okay?"

"Okay."

And there's silence enough that Chuuya thinks that, in the yellow glow of the faulty hotel lamps and with the bustle of a not yet asleep city as background, the conversation has been cut short without conclusion on either side. Yet Dazai offers a confession into the space between them.

"It wasn't just that. Or it was— mainly the scalpel. Easy to flick around and change the depth, depending on the punishment. But he always fixed me up afterward, so it was harder to tell."

Chuuya stops what he's doing for a second, determining what to say. "We could tell," he decides on, quiet.

Dazai stiffens. "What do you mean 'we'," he asks, and Chuuya lets himself marvel at the sorrow that washes through him at the revelation that Dazai thought the abuse wasn't noticeable.

"The upper ranking members, mainly." He chooses his words carefully, slowly. "Ane-san and Hirotsu seemed like they knew, but the others had to too."

Chuuya fastens the bandages at Dazai's wrist and reaches for the other arm to wrap. Dazai's skin is unusually warm to the touch.

"I suppose I should be grateful that the hat rack relocated me, before their pity became too great for even my conviction to ignorance," Dazai finally says.

And he doesn't say it's better now, but he reaches a hand up and slips his fingers under the bandages around his head, and tugs. They sag loose across his face, features peeking out between strips of white. His other eye is brown too, the same hue as his first, with amber shot through, deep into the iris. It's unexpectedly normal.

"Hey, you're getting those bandages all tangled up with these," Chuuya huffs, "put them away."

"You're as annoying as usual," Dazai responds, but does as asked.

It's a month and a half since thier escape when the underground comes calling. Or more specifically, knocking on their hotel door. Chuuya opens it up expecting to see a cleaning lady and is instead met with two shivering young women in the lobby. They're drenched and dripping onto the floor from the rain outside, and before Chuuya can even say one word Dazai comes up behind him and lets them in.

"What the hell," he asks, or more accurately hisses, in Dazai's face when he turns back after tossing the women some towels and pointing them to the bathroom. "Who the fuck *are* they?"

"Debutantes on the run from their abusive, politician uncle. They found my email address and are willing to pay quite the hefty sum for an escort to the port."

"And you worked all this out without telling me?"

Dazai shrugs, and it's so casual it sends a wave of sharp irritation through Chuuya. "We need money," he says.

"We can get money without getting on the government's bad side."

"One minor politician does not a government make," Dazai responds, holding his finger up. He rolls his eyes like Chuuya's the one being overdramatic, and Dazai's not the one who compromised their position.

"Deactivate your email," Chuuya says. "We'll take this *one* job but that's it. If we get tricked into some sort of ambush I might not be able to save you, and we can't even go to the hospital like this."

Dazai rolls his eyes *again*, and Chuuya kind of wants to strangle him. "If you fancy being broke, sure." And when Chuuya does actually make the gesture, reaching out with gloved hands to Dazai's

neck, he says, “Fine, *alright* .”

That night does not end up being the last time.

At least it’s a better side hustle than handing out flyers for a cosplay cafe again.

It’s been three months and Chuuya has gotten a pretty good handle on grocery shopping, at this point. He’d never ran errands by himself before, with the Sheep, because they traveled in packs when they were younger and he’d been deemed too important for those sorts of things as he aged, but now he makes adjustments to the lists Dazai compiles and grabs easy, instant food from whichever convenience store is near their newest choice of motel.

He’s stuffing various flavors of boxed curry into a shopping basket when he turns the corner and bumps into someone. “Sorry,” he mutters. and when he glances up it's an older man with slicked-back hair and large glasses. Familiarity tickles the edges of Chuuya’s mind, but he pushes it aside in favor of focusing on keeping his curry boxes from spilling to the floor.

Well, that is until the man starts to say “Nakahara—” and Chuuya shoves them both down the aisle and grabs his knife from inside his jacket. The curry boxes drop. He angles the knife just out of sight from anyone that might walk by, and presses it against the suit jacket at the man’s side.

“Who are you with,” he asks, deadly quiet.

The man stares at him with wide eyes, but then bafflingly, they flatten immediately until he looks resigned. “Just like your partner, hm? And to think I was concerned about Dazai-kun for a while.”

Chuuya presses the knife in harder, and at least then the man starts to squirm. “How do you know Dazai? How did you find me?”

“I wasn’t looking for you,” the man says, and then gestures with his arm, which turns out to have a half-full basket looped around it. “Just a happy coincidence.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re so happy to see me,” Chuuya says, and he’s already tired of this nonsensical conversation. “Who the hell even are you?”

The man sighs. He pushes his glasses up with the hand that the shopping basket is around, jangling it and all the items in it. “My name,” he says, and he sounds a bit disappointed. “Is Sakaguchi Ango, if you’ll recall having met me, Nakahara-san.”

Chuuya hands Sakaguchi’s number over to Dazai when he gets back, who then immediately dials it and gets sent to voicemail. One week later and they’re sitting at a cafe at the very edge of the city, Sakaguchi Ango and Oda Sakunosuke on one side of a circular, wrought table and Dazai and Chuuya on the other.

“It was chaos,” Sakaguchi huffs, stirring sugar into his coffee. “No one knew where Double Black was and the boss sent out teams in case you’d been kidnapped.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Dazai nods readily. “The shrimp kidnapped me right in the middle of the night, could you believe it? I was minding my own business and there he was!”

Chuuya jabs his elbow into Dazai's ribs. "Like I didn't talk to you about it before, jackass. You knew what was gonna happen and didn't even prepare."

"Well," Dazai says, "only a fool would have thought you were being serious."

"In any case," Sakaguchi says, bringing the conversation back around before it devolves into bickering. "It seems there wasn't any reason to worry. The boss seems to have let it go at this point."

"And you seem better, too," Oda says. He has a deep, smooth voice and when he looks at Dazai his gaze is somehow both interrogative yet soft. "I know you can both take care of yourselves, but if you're ever in any trouble, feel free to ask for help."

"We'll be *fine*, *OdaSaku*," Dazai says, stretching the name out too long, and lands an elbow on the table and his chin on a hand. "It'd be mutually assured destruction to go after us when he has Corruption."

Dazai jabs the thumb of his other hand to Chuuya, and even though from anyone else the words may have held admiration, from Dazai they sound mocking. Chuuya pointedly slurps his iced coffee loudly and steps on Dazai's foot under the table, to hear him squeak. It's the same old song and dance between them right now, even if they spend most of their days quietly comfortable with each other's presence in make-shift homes.

Chuuya doesn't know or care much about Oda and Sakaguchi, in all honesty; however he went through all this trouble for Dazai, in the end, so damn if he's not going to make it worth his while by getting him to his friends as often as is safely possible.

It might only be because of that, Dazai's now more lively mood at seeing Oda and Sakaguchi, that caused the former to say that he seemed better, but Chuuya will take what he can get.

He can see it too, in Dazai's more carefree attitude, in the way he gets out of bed earlier in the days that follow, and in how his grins are like watching a 100-watt lightbulb burn. Chuuya takes those flashes of memory and hoards them.

Six months into their defection, Dazai finally gets a job.

He goes to the coffee shop a block from Chuuya's own place of work, and gets hired all but immediately. His hours are suspiciously convenient, and he always brings back a paper bag with some pastry or the other, so Chuuya barely has to ponder to understand that he's exploiting his infectious charisma to do whatever the hell he wants there.

He doesn't want to visit, at *all* honestly, but Dazai convinces him to pick him up from his closing shift one day and Chuuya gets to witness the carnage in all its glory.

Dazai, stage right, flirting with customers and coworkers alike, dialing up the charm on his middle-aged shift manager who insists he looks *just* like her nephew back home, and isn't Chuuya lucky to have a friend so sweet? And then adoring girls stage left, middle schoolers who don't know better than to hit on older boys with mysterious backstories, giving him little gifts and parts of their pastries like he's some sort of puppy— and Dazai calls *Chuuya* the dog.

“Want one?” Dazai asks, and unwraps a chocolate and presses it to Chuuya’s lips. He flinches and snatches it out of Dazai’s hands, eyes it suspiciously for a second before eating it in one bite. Fire bursts in his mouth and he breaks into a coughing fit, because even though he normally likes spicy food he didn’t expect a chocolate to burn this much, and because it tastes less like tabasco and more like wasabi.

One of the baristas grabs him a cold glass of milk and once he downs it, feeling less like his face is being set aflame from the inside out, he grabs Dazai’s collar and pulls him over the counter. “You’re an asshole,” Chuuya chokes out over the sound of a few gasping and squealing girls, and Dazai’s grin is blinding.

“Only to you, half-pint.” And then he winks.

Chuuya conceives after that day— that turns out to be *Valentine’s Day* and which he hadn’t actually known about at all, until Dazai mentioned it regarding all the bags of sweets they were lugging back on the train ride home— to never visit the coffee shop again.

He is *mostly* successful in that endeavor, except on the days where either Oda or Sakaguchi or both decide to visit and he resolves to stand guard there, because it’s far too easy to look at the group of those three as mafia traitors and have a random gang kick down a door or two.

As loathe as Chuuya is to step foot in that establishment, and as strange as he feels, standing around and trying not to listen in on the conversations of a tight-knit group of friends he isn’t quite a part of, it turns out that Dazai is happier now. He doesn’t say it, but Chuuya can see it in the way his gait is lighter than before, the way his eyes shine whenever his friends visit. It’s not often by any means, because even with Chuuya there as deterrent it’s still dangerous to meet, but Dazai always seems more alive then.

And the last thing that makes the job worth it— they can make rent now. They move into a one-bedroom apartment using fake papers when it’s clear that the cheap motels aren’t going to cut it for any longer, and buy futons to lay out. Dazai complains, because he prefers mattress beds and because he enjoys annoying Chuuya, but they make it work.

8 months into their defection from the mafia, just in time for Chuuya’s 17th birthday, they make a home.

A couple months after that, and the delicate, almost idyllic balance they’ve created gets thrown off-course in the form of a pair of too-bright eyes.

Chapter End Notes

i wrote like 2k of this 6 months ago and didn’t know where to go with it, then came to an epiphany a couple days ago and dropped all my other projects because i sort of became obsessed with this au— updates will probably happen way sooner than they should be considering the amount of school work i have, but oh well !

brick by brick, board by board

Chapter Summary

Chuuya deals with some fallout, of the painfully human variety.

Chapter Notes

a lot of this chapter focuses on other people's reactions to dazai's mental issues, partially due it not being from his POV, so i wanted to give a disclaimer that there won't be any of that beyond this chapter and that i completely agree that discussions about mental illness, treatment, and care should center the people who have those illnesses first and foremost. that being said, chuuya's a traumatized kid too, and these two are equals and partners for a reason so— the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chuuya is staking out the alleys near a small jeweler's for loiterers, on one of the first underground jobs Dazai had thrust upon him in far too long, when he senses a presence behind him and whips around with his knife already in hand.

Out of the shadows slinks a lithe figure cloaked in black, face covered from the nose down in a mask.

"*Gin?"* Chuuya gapes. His grip on the knife loosens considerably, not because he pegs her as a particularly safe person, but because she's 13 and *just* started training under Kouyou when he left. It's not an insult to her skills, since she's incredible in a fight for her age and even compared to some adults, but rather an accurate assessment of the danger presented to him right now.

"Chuuya-*san* ," Gin says, and lifts a hand to pull off her mask. Her mouth is set into a tight line and she looks terribly small, even though she already has an inch on Chuuya. "Chuuya-*san* please, I— I have a request."

"A request important enough that you went out to find mafia traitors?" Chuuya checks his surroundings to make sure there isn't anyone else on standby to ambush him, and sheathes his knife. "What if I attacked you, did you think that far?"

Gin presses her hands together tightly, and even though they're trembling with nervous energy she keeps her chin up and meets his gaze. "You wouldn't hurt me. You've always liked me, at least more than Dazai-*san* did."

"I like *everyone* more than that bastard ever could," Chuuya corrects. "This is still stupid of you. Even if I didn't kill you someone else could have— could *still* see you talking to me and arrive at their own conclusions."

“What if those conclusions were right?”

Chuuya’s surprise is palpable, if the way Gin looks almost proud of herself for being the cause of it is any indication. “What did you come here for?” he manages to ask, finally.

“For your help. Ryuu-*nii* wants to see Dazai-*san* .”

“That’s dumb as shit.”

“Ryuu-*nii needs* to see Dazai-*san*. He’s been searching everywhere, even though everyone else gave up, and he’s not getting enough sleep because of it, and he— He thinks Dazai-*san*’s abandoned him. And he won’t tell me this but I know he thinks that he must have been a part of the reason why.”

Gin stops abruptly, hands wringing together and tiny nails digging red crescents onto the backs of them. Chuuya steps forward and runs a palm up and down her back in a half-hug, because for all his misgivings the entire situation is sort of pathetic. She looks up at him with eyes that are as big as moons and as tired as the night that rings it, and Chuuya recognizes the feeling in her expression as worry and fear, just the same as he’s experienced before.

Really, the Akutagawa kid is far more like Dazai than he should be, even if his poisons of choice are paranoia and overwork instead of disillusionment and razors.

“If you’re serious about this, Mori will notice if you keep acting suspicious and don’t leave soon. And when you do you’ll be on the run *for real*; if you get caught you’ll be executed.”

“We know,” Gin says, and then, “but I don’t think Chuuya-*san* will let us be.”

“So you’re that determined to make trouble for us?”

“No. I just don’t know what else to do.”

Chuuya sighs. “You have way too much faith in me. I need to see if Dazai is okay with this first. Meet me at the edge of the warehouse district in two days, and I’ll let you know.”

Gin nods, singularly, and then again more frantically once this sinks in. Her shoulders drop and she turns into Chuuya’s hold and squeezes. “Thank you, thank you so much—”

“Hey, hold on,” Chuuya yelps, and unwinds the arms too-tight around his neck. “I haven’t made any promises, jeez!”

“You said you would try, though,” and when Gin pulls away, her smile is small but vibrant.

A week later Chuuya is carrying Gin’s duffel over his shoulder and walking her and her brother to his and Dazai’s apartment. Ryuunosuke is stiff limbed and dazed in a way where Chuuya isn’t sure if he should be concerned or amused, and Gin darts forward every few meters to check that their surroundings are clear.

Dazai, when Chuuya had mentioned the conversation, had gone unreadable and petulant, but he’d agreed without too much pushing. Chuuya isn’t sure what he’s thinking on a good day, but it’s impossible to read him on this. He isn’t bitter, but he hadn’t seemed entirely comfortable when they’d gone to buy extra futons to arrange in the living room for the two siblings. Chuuya had

asked if he wanted to come to escort them back, and he'd declined in favor of running calculations on their new living expenses with a notepad and pen on the couch, which he'd never been thrilled to do before and certainly didn't need a physical tally for.

The apartment is quiet when Chuuya unlocks the door. He leads the Akutagawa siblings in, and Dazai is waiting for them, smiling blandly and waving at them from up on the kitchen counter. Chuuya sets Gin's bag down and pushes his shoulder until Dazai hops off.

"Don't set your ass where we make the food," he says.

"Does it really matter when *my ass* is a full course meal?"

Chuuya screeches and pushes him again, this time hard enough to knock him into the wall. When he turns around Gin's is coughing into her shoulder, rapidly transitioning from pale horror to red-faced embarrassment. Ryuunosuke may or may not have even caught onto the words, with the way he's staring so dazed in what is only Dazai's *general direction*.

"Welcome to our lovely abode," Dazai says, stepping forward and around Chuuya's reach. "How are you feeling, newly minted traitors that you are?"

"Fine," Ryuunosuke manages to get out, but he can't meet Dazai's gaze.

Gin steps up beside him. "Nervous," she says. "But not as scared with you both here. Thank you for agreeing to this." She's wearing a small, glittery navy colored backpack over her shoulders, and she clutches the straps tightly while she speaks.

Dazai smiles smoothly. "You're welcome, of course. The most trouble you could actually give us is setting back the budget on my surprise birthday party Chuuya's been planning."

Ah. Fuck.

In his defense, he'd been caught up working and then thinking about how to help the Akutagawa siblings. Against said defense, Dazai, the bastard, had never managed to forget Chuuya's birthday before by some miracle.

"Chuuya-*san* doesn't seem like he knows what you mean," Ryuunosuke says, choosing the absolute worst time to re-enter the world of the literate and sending Chuuya into karmic trouble.

"I'm just a good poker face," he says, tight, and grabs Gin's duffel from the floor and Ryuunosuke's from his hand before dumping them inside the curtained-off section they'd created in the living room. When he returns to the foyer, Dazai is staring at him with an amused expression that's worse than anger, honestly.

"I *was* looking forward to spending the day with you," Dazai is saying, "Just the two of us. But I'm sure you have something to make it up to me?" And Dazai uses *anata* here which sends chills up Chuuya's spine, because being referred to so affectionately in such a mocking manner can only spell trouble.

It's not like Dazai's ever cared much for birthdays or Chuuya's part in them before, but he's seemed more *present* the past few months, so Chuuya figures it's an interest that comes with the whole 'being able to focus on things that aren't navigating mafia politics' thing. And also the forced friendship from proximity with his partner and reliance on him from survival.

So, “Yeah, I got it,” Chuuya lies, and Dazai’s grin only gets sharper.

“Wonderful. *Anyways*,” and he turns back to the Akutagawas now, Gin trying her best not to laugh and Ryuunosuke’s facial expression going through a complicated set of contortions. “Feel free to make yourselves at home. We’ll need you guys to find some sort of part-time jobs before the end of the month, to pay your share. If we save up we could get real mattresses, or find another apartment.”

They both nod, and then “Dazai-*san*,” Ryuunosuke starts. “You’ll continue to train me, right? Over these past 10 months I’ve— I have improved.”

“If you can find some sort of empty space, then sure,” Dazai says, though he doesn’t sound particularly excited by the prospect. Ryuunosuke, on the other hand, is obviously quivering with repressed excitement, or maybe anxiety.

Dazai looks over at Chuuya, who can just make out the awkward uncertainty in his eyes, before turning back. “Show me what you’ve learned, Akutagawa.” And then he places a hand on the other’s shoulder, stilted.

Gives it a pat.

Ryuunosuke bursts into tears.

Birthday’s, now, are a simple affair.

For Chuuya’s own two months ago, Dazai had gone and bought an ice cream-cake and given him a wrapped box containing a bottle of black nail polish, hair ties and clips to hold his too-long bangs back, and a sturdy case for his phone since he’d cracked the last one. Those had been the nicest gifts he’d given Chuuya, because even though the black leather choker from his 16th birthday had been expensive and polished it had come with annoying dog collar jokes.

Chuuya still has said choker because it fits his aesthetic, even with the baggage attached to it, and wears it now along with those new silver clips pinning his hair back at one side, and shuffles a chocolate cake into the apartment at the same time that Ryuunosuke and Gin pull a small set of gifts out from their curtained-off bedroom. One of the three bags is from Oda and Sakaguchi, delivered here a few days ago by mail since they knew neither of them would be able to make it the day of.

Dazai steps out of the shower in a cloud of steam, a towel still draped across his shoulders, and freezes when he sees the gathering on the low-lying coffee table. The only lights in the apartment come from the candles on the cake and the bathroom’s half-closed door behind Dazai, who stares at them surprise for all he had *definitely* known what was happening last-minute.

They sing happy birthday with various degrees of sincerity and Dazai blows out the candles and cuts the cake, looking somehow both smugly delighted and humbled, then Ryuunosuke goes to turn the lights on proper so Dazai can open his gifts.

The one from Oda and Sakaguchi is an old Gameboy console with a small selection of cartridges— which Gin frowns at curiously and Dazai immediately takes to explaining the glories of, because he's something of a nerd, on good days, and this is one of those— and an envelope with Chuuya's name on it. It's a month's worth of rent in bills, and a memo from Oda apologizing for not having gotten anything for Chuuya's own birthday, as though he'd even known.

Gin and Ryuunouske's gift bag is next, which is cobbled together and nothing more than a handful of chocolates and another handful of taffy, along with enough medical bandages that Chuuya can probably strike them from the list of expenses for a good few months.

Chuuya's gift, when Dazai gets to it, is unreasonably embarrassing. In the bag is a pair of fuzzy blue socks, thick and to be worn around the house, and a journal. It's sectioned off week by week, has pages of stickers in the end, and when Dazai cracks it open and recites the first page headings out loud, reads, "On Mondays, list two things you look forward to for the end of the week. On Tuesdays, write down three good things that happened that day."

Dazai looks up at Chuuya, and it's impossible to tell what he's feeling under the blank mask. "Is this a joke?"

"No," Chuuya says, and shifts uncomfortably on his seat on the floor. "You just get into your head sometimes and it's hard to figure out what to do then, so I thought, you know…."

Dazai stares at him hard from his place above him on the couch. He reaches forward and Chuuya expects a flick on the forehead or a finger poking his nose, and instead gets a hair clip snatched out of his bangs, sending them fanning across his eyes.

"*Hey*," he squawks, and when he pushes his bangs back up Dazai is grinning at him like he's hopeless. He brandishes the clip in the air and says, airily, "my birthday present should be getting to cut your hair!"

"Don't you dare," Chuuya warns, and gets up on his knees and reaches for the clip. Dazai holds it up, out of reach. When he grins his face is just centimeters away, and he loops a finger through the buckle of Chuuya's choker to keep him in place while he studies his bangs.

"A snip here and a snip there, don't you think?" Dazai looks away and at the Akutagawas when he asks, but there isn't any response since the siblings are both smart kids who know better than to choose either of their sides.

Chuuya closes his eyes and counts to 5. "Fine," he mutters, and when Dazai pushes him back, opens them again to a stunned face.

"You're serious?"

"If you fuck it up I'll kill you though. Don't do anything weird and you can play at being a barber, or whatever."

Dazai unhooks his finger from the choker and drops his arm. "Well," he settles on, and his eyes dart over to the siblings again, before finding their way back to Chuuya. "If you insist." And he takes the clip and carefully pins Chuuya's bangs back in place.

It's one month after the birthday when Chuuya walks straight into Ryuunosuke, who's leaving the single bedroom looking a little green in the face.

Ryuunosuke mutters out an apology before pushing past him, and when Chuuya enters the room, ready to change after a long shift bussing and waiting tables, he understands why. Dazai is sitting cross-legged on the floor, shirtless and currently redoing his bandages, scars all very visible.

“Shit,” he says out loud, involuntarily, then shuts the door behind him and sits beside Dazai. He’s a third of the way through rewrapping Dazai’s chest when the other finally speaks.

“Did he seem disgusted?”

Chuuya answers truthfully. “I don’t know. Probably not. I think it’s more likely that he was scared.”

Dazai’s mouth curves up in a crescent, but it’s an upsetting, empty mimicry of mirth. “Of me? Or does he think I’ll do this to him if he messes up training?”

“*For* you,” Chuuya clarifies, and knocks his knuckles against Dazai’s temple, gentle. “You’re pretty stupid sometimes, you know that?”

“I resent that statement,” Dazai responds, and finishes wrapping his arms. He takes another roll of bandages, fiddling with the ends while Chuuya works his way up. Quietly, he asks, “Are you scared too?”

Chuuya’s hands halt. The question requires a level of candidacy that means his throat closes up when he even tries to speak, but Dazai fingers are tight on the roll now and he’s unnaturally still. Obviously, Chuuya's scared, because no matter how many months go by Dazai keeps relapsing into hurting himself like this; Chuuya isn’t sure what the trigger is, if there is one, but every time that he comes back to find bloody bandages his heart drops and his mind screams at him to tear the place apart searching for the other. He doesn’t know how to make it stop and the helplessness just makes it worse.

But as horrible as those days feel, when he inevitably finds Dazai looking so dejected and numb he knows it’s all worse for the other than it is for him.

Chuuya resumes his work, passing the roll from hand to hand as he wraps up Dazai’s chest from behind. “Every day,” he starts, and even a whisper feels too loud in the silence of the room. “I’m scared that I’ll wake up to find you dead beside me.”

Dazai lets out a breath so long and deep it speaks more for his exhaustion that any words ever could. “Allow me to ease your fears,” he says dryly, and places the bandages in his hand back into the kit. “I have too many responsibilities right now to consider offing myself without guilt.”

That isn’t the statement Chuuya wants nor is looking for, but relief still floods him.

He finishes wrapping and fastens the bandages in place, then stands to put away the first aid kit in a nearby place while Dazai gets his shirt back on. It’s late enough that he should be making dinner, and Dazai says he wants to be alone so he finds all the sharp objects in the room and brings them with him to the kitchen.

Ryuunosuke comes up next to him to help cut some vegetables. He’s clumsy with a knife for someone who’s so skilled in a fight, and the potatoes come out in lopsided chunks. Chuuya’s breaking up instant curry bricks to toss in the pot when he speaks.

“Is he— okay?” Ryuunosuke asks, and he sounds so lost, even a little frustrated.

Chuuya grabs a wooden spoon to stir while he thinks over his answer. “He’ll be okay, later,” he settles on. “Don’t worry yourself over it too much, I’ll take care of it.”

“How can I *not* worry?” Ryuunosuke snaps, and when Chuuya looks over his shoulder he’s glaring at him, hands thrown into fists at his sides. “You just admitted he’s not okay, he’s— Dazai-*san* is —”

“I know, but it’s not like there’s anything that—”

“Can’t you just take him to a doctor? We can find one, right, or you can ask his friends!”

“*Hey* !” Chuuya hisses, turns around fully and crosses his arms over his chest, feeling his irritation spike.

Ryuunosuke is angry now, but it’s a frustrated sort of angry. Chuuya knows because that’s how he felt too, and still feels, honestly— it’s easier to be angry at not being able to do anything than it is to feel sad or guilty about it. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to let Ryuunosuke lash out at him, either.

“We can’t take him to a doctor,” he says slowly, trying not to raise his voice. “We don’t have any fucking papers. Plus, just a regular physician probably wouldn’t be able to do shit anyway, because Dazai needs a therapist, or a fucking *psychiatrist*, or something. So unless you can figure out how to clear his record and get him legal documents, then this,” and he waves the spoon to the kitchen, the curry in the pot, Ryuunosuke himself, “is the best we can do.”

“But— he—”

Ryuunosuke, taken aback, looks down at the floor and twists his fists into his pants. Chuuya’s anger evaporates at the way his shoulders shake.

He sighs and scrubs a hand through his hair, now trimmed messily to a few centimeters of length. “Look. This is the best we can do, alright. Just, if you feel bad and want to help, read some articles online, and listen to what he says he wants to do when he’s feeling out of it.”

Ryuunosuke nods, and the conversation ends. He goes to get Gin to help him grab some plates and utensils, reusable plastic and bought cheap, and pops open the rice cooker to divide it into 4 plates. Chuuya heaps curry into them and lets them bring everything over to the coffee table and goes to call Dazai.

It turns out he hadn’t managed to remove all the sharp objects from the room when he left.

Chuuya stands in the doorway, shuts his eyes so tight they hurt, reopens them to find nothing changed, and steps into the room. He takes the first aid kit out again, avoiding Dazai’s gaze, and pries the other’s hands away to rewrap the swath of bandages from knee to mid-thigh. He sets everything away one more time, hauls Dazai up and leads him to the coffee table. Sits him down and nudges him to eat while the rest of them do, while Gin talks about how the bookstore she’s passing out flyers for has a stray cat visiting.

Ryuunosuke offers to do the dishes, watching the way Chuuya stays so close to Dazai, and he thanks him. They fiddle with the channels on the small TV for an hour or so before Dazai says he’ll be off to bed.

Chuuya watches him go, turns to look at Ryuunosuke and Gin. Stands and gestures them to grab their sheets and come with him. Dazai’s staring up at the ceiling when they drag all their futons besides his. Chuuya throws an arm over Dazai’s stomach, careful not to jostle his wounds, and Gin

latches on from the other side despite not knowing all the circumstances. Ryuunosuke is behind her, and since he's not one for physical contact he turns to face them instead, head above Gin's.

Chuuya's eyes are closed so he can't see Dazai's expression, but he feels a hand over his and isn't dislodged for the rest of the night.

The first time that Chuuya's left alone with one of Dazai's drinking buddies is 13 months after they defect. When they visit, Dazai is out training Ryuunosuke at an abandoned, overgrown lot a few streets away. The first few times Chuuya had been there with them, partly out of nerves about someone finding them, partly out of nerves about Dazai going too far— as he's said before, Dazai can get too deep in his own head occasionally, sometimes in ways that ended in worse results for others rather than himself.

However, after a few sessions, it had seemed like there wasn't much to worry about. There wasn't so much a shift in Dazai as a shift in dynamic, Chuuya thinks, but it looked safe enough for Ryuunosuke that he'd been able to leave them to their devices and stay at home with Gin.

Today, however, Gin is talking with Sakaguchi in the living room while Oda has followed Chuuya into the kitchen, where he scrubs at the dishes that he'd accidentally let pile up over the last few days even though it'd been his turn to do them.

"How have you been doing?" Oda asks, settling back against the counter and watching Chuuya work, sipping on a styrofoam cup of coffee.

Dazai should be back in a good fifteen, maybe twenty more minutes, and they're not strangers enough that they'd ignore each other, but Chuuya has never been the most comfortable around Oda or Sakaguchi. Part of it is the lack of common ground between them, and another part is because every time he's around them he can't help but think of Dazai, and what he must see in them. Oda especially, whose every word Dazai clings to even on the bad days.

"Doing fine," Chuuya answers. "Nothing out of the ordinary other than trying to help Gin and Ryuunosuke get settled a while back."

"People are still mad about that," Oda mentions. "That so many powerful kids with potential managed to leave the Port Mafia, just like that. They think you two are trying to form your own sort of gang."

Chuuya laughs. He scrubs harder at a particularly tough stain, the result of burnt ramen stuck to the bottom of a pan. "I'd rather eat shit," he says. "What the hell was the point of running away if I'm just going to start another gang war and send us all back to where we started?"

Oda hums. He blows on his coffee, steam swirling above it in curls, and takes another sip. "You ran away for Dazai, didn't you?" The way he asks it is almost conversational, but Chuuya still feels like he's walking on eggshells when he answers.

"Something like that." Chuuya dunks a mug into the filled sink, drowns it in bubbles then amends, "He needed some help, and I didn't have anything to lose."

"But now you do."

"Yeah," he says, "I guess I do."

They stand there in silence for an uncountable amount of minutes. When Oda speaks again, it's as Chuuya grabs a rag to start drying the dishes, now finally scrubbed and washed clean.

"Thank you," he says, and his gaze when he looks at Chuuya is unbearably genuine. "For caring enough about Dazai to do that. It was brave of you, and it might have been one of the best things anyone's done for him."

"It was whatever," Chuuya answers, because he doesn't have a better response. His throat feels clogged. "He's not fixed or anything."

"No," Oda agrees. "It's impossible to fix real people, but you can definitely help and be there for them. You're a good kid, Chuuya."

Dazai chooses that moment to enter the apartment, calling his friends' names in a singing voice when he notices their shoes at the door. Oda gives him a final nod before heading out of the small kitchen and into the foyer. It's for the best, really, because no one's actually said that sort of thing to him before, and he doesn't quite know how to take it.

The members of the Sheep had heaped him with praise about his fighting prowess or his dependability; Kouyou, for the year she'd had him, had been kind and loving but never gave out praise beyond his skill or thanking him for things; this is a statement about his character, pretty much a glowing review coming from Dazai's normally aloof best friend.

Chuuya takes a deep breath and wipes his arm over his wet eyes.

The past year has been hard, for all that he likes to pretend it wasn't, living on their own away from the six-figure salaries, high rises, and paid protection the mafia afforded. Chuuya had spent all but one year of his life on the streets, but Dazai was decidedly a different person, and his mentality an entirely different beast.

Chuuya doesn't want to admit he spent more time than he'd have liked wondering if he'd actually made the right decision, or if one day he'd wake up and realize Dazai was actually worse off without any safety net.

The outside validation that yes, he had been right, that he hadn't irreversibly fucked up, that he'd *done well*, is so reassuring that he could collapse.

Chapter End Notes

you might have noticed the change in chapter number for this fic! i ended up having to split this chapter up because it was getting long, and also because the next part of this was giving me some trouble writing. (that made me lose motivation and to get it back i thought it would be a *great* idea to make sketches for this fic but then that turned into a full piece of overcomplicated art that took more hours to create than this chapter took to write so-- guess it's now obvious that i'm the type of person who works harder and *not* smarter lmao)

and the duct tape's been exchanged for mortar

Chapter Summary

> Part 1: Chuuya should probably work through his trauma, at some point. Part 2: Dazai pines, quite obviously to anyone in the vicinity.

Chapter Notes

> brief mention of recreational drug use near the end of the chapter (no i don't know what weed culture is like in japan but i truly believe that oda is a stoner. just let me have this one thing. like this man seems blazed out of his mind in half his canon appearances i find it so funny—)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They pass the 16 month mark when Dazai asks, conversationally while his friends are visiting, about Oda's children. Chuuya looks up from his book, a thick fantasy novel from the library, and sees Gin and Ryuunosuke's shadows perk up from behind the curtain to their room.

"You have kids?" Chuuya asks. Oda is 22, maybe, or possibly 23, and as surprisingly young as that is for having multiple children it's also rare for being in the mafia.

"You could say that," Oda answers. "Though I'm more of a guardian than a parent," He starts listing them off on his fingers. "Sakura-chan, Yuu-kun, Shinji, Katsumi, and Kousuke. A friend of mine really does most of the work, while I send him money."

"You adopted them after the Dragon Head Conflict, right?" Sakaguchi asks. He drums his fingers on the briefcase in his lap, the object which is typically the reason for why his visits last about half as long as Oda's for some classified reason or the other.

The Dragon Head Conflict, whenever mentioned, still sends a chill down Chuuya's spine. Even though it's been over a year, he likes to keep his memories of the time locked away in the furthest recesses of his mind. It'd left so many of his subordinates as corpses and their children as orphans that Chuuya hadn't even gotten a body count, but the fact that Oda has apparently taken in some of those kids sends honest wonder through him. The virtuosity needed for someone to take 5 kids in at his age and without even being married, presumably, is undeniably admirable.

Oda nods in confirmation and all Chuuya says is "That's cool," for lack of anything better, and then immediately feels stupid. When Oda turns to him, however, his acknowledging smile is kind.

"Yeah. They're cool kids, too."

Chuuya ducks his head, turning back to his book. Dazai pipes up again from beside him. "Anyway, aren't you worried about them? If your boss finds out you're meeting with traitors they're the

easiest way to get to you, you know?"

"You make a good point," Sakaguchi replies, sounding thoughtful. "There's nothing to say Mori-san doesn't already know about them. I doubt you'd want to stop meeting here, but you can't ensure their protection if you're consorting with traitors."

Chuuya brings the book down a fraction and looks at them over the edge of it. Oda looks tense now, perturbed even. Before he can speak, Dazai muses, "Protection, hm?"

Chuuya looks over only to find Dazai already watching him.

Chuuya stares at him. Glances over at Oda and Sakaguchi and then back at him. Dazai looks like he's found the answer to a puzzle. Chuuya closes his book and glances over at Oda and Sakaguchi again, who now have slow understanding of what Dazai's implying dawning on their faces, and then over to Ryuunosuke and Gin's shadows that are sitting alert, and then back to Dazai.

He stands from the couch and grabs Dazai by the arm, dragging him over to the kitchen.

"No," he says immediately, before the other can even speak.

"Oh come on, we already have the Akutagawas, what's a few more kids?"

"5 kids isn't just a *few more*," Chuuya seethes, and crosses his arms.

"Semantics," Dazai says. He comes to stand beside Chuuya and leans against the kitchen counter, nudging their shoulders together. "I don't think it really matters. You'd see them and then get immediately attached even if it was 10 kids or 20."

"Fuck off," Chuuya says, and he can feel the embarrassment rising in his cheeks.

Dazai grins at him, sly, and falls against his side. Chuuya pushes back. "The shrimp is a softie, me-thinks." He pokes Chuuya in the cheek.

"I am *not*. And don't call me that, asshole."

"Are too. Why are you so against this anyway," Dazai asks, pulling away and removing his finger to tug on Chuuya's shirt sleeve instead. "They're helpless kids that need protection. You should be the one that wants to bring them over, not me."

"Yeah, so why *are* you the one that wants to take them all in? Don't you hate kids," Chuuya asks, but it comes out more like a statement of fact. It pretty much is, considering he hasn't seen Dazai produce a smile anywhere in a meter radius of a child before, even if their experience with people under the age of 10 is limited.

Dazai raises an eyebrow. "Because those kids are in danger. I don't *want* to care about them but OdaSaku's been helping us a lot lately, and if his kids die because of us—"

"They're not going to *die*," Chuuya says, mildly horrified.

Dazai lifts his weight off Chuuya and levels him with a flat look. "Hey shortie, I don't know what moral boundaries you think a mob-boss who cut open his own ward to keep him in line would have, but I can all but guarantee that those lines aren't drawn at assassinating children."

And…. *fuck* , Dazai does have a point, as much as it turns his stomach to think about. But also, what's to say that they'll actually be able to prevent that outcome from occurring. "So maybe you're right," Chuuya says, and scowls when Dazai's expression turns triumphant, "but if Mori wants them gone then we can't do anything to *stop him*."

Dazai waves his hand, an irreverent gesture. "Corruption. Mutually assured destruction. I know the oxygen down there is second-hand but what's not clicking in your brain?"

"What's not clicking for *you*, asshole? So what about Corruption, it's worthless if we're not both there with them!" Chuuya shoves his hands into his pockets, tries not to dig his nails into his thighs. "Gin and Ryunosuke are different: they can fight. We can leave them alone for a while and it'll probably be okay. If we have the kids with us, then we just draw more attention to them, and then if Mori wants to attack all he has to do is find a time where I'm not with them."

Dazai is quiet for just long enough that Chuuya's gaze flickers back to him. He looks at Chuuya like he's trying to read him, head turned just slightly, brows tensed just a bit. When he finally speaks, his voice is quiet.

"It's better than leaving them to their own devices. Safety in the home of an ability user most of the time is better than none of the time, especially when Mori-san isn't baited in easily enough to get his attention *drawn* to things." He steps forwards, leaning down a bit and casting a shadow over Chuuya. "What's this really about?"

Dazai's gaze is unbearable to keep. Chuuya breaks it, stares down at his feet and takes a breath.

"You know what happened the last time I was in charge of so many people?" Chuuya asks, and even letting himself say the words out loud feels like he's tearing out pieces of his lungs, barehanded and up through his throat. "I fucked up, alright? I know there were definitely more people in the Sheep, more subordinates back in the mafia, but what would this even be— like 10 people? 9? And so many of them are *kids*. We're on the run and I'm *one fucking person*, Dazai!"

He looks up now, and Dazai holds no reaction, is measuring his expression and letting himself fall completely blank, and Chuuya wishes he could see the surprise or the worry.

"What if I'm not there one day, and they know where we live, or they ambush everyone all at once? Corruption might be— might be *insurance* or whatever, but it's not a threat if I'm *not there*."

There's a touch to his cheek, cold like ice, and then it floods through him like river water, washing away the heat in his body and slowing his breathing and turning everything blue.

For The Tainted Sorrow wasn't even active, but Dazai's ability still feels as though it's doused and cleansed every bit of it from his skin down to his bones, and he feels clarity wash through himself. "Shit," he says, aloud and not on purpose, and Dazai's mask finally breaks into a fond half-smile, eyebrows tilted up.

"Yeah. Have you been bottling this up all this time, short stuff?"

"Didn't think so," Chuuya mutters. He brings his hand up to pull Dazai's down, but once his fingers wrap around the other's wrist another wave of coolness washes down his arm, and he leaves it there. "I don't know— sorry for like, freaking out on you. I didn't mean to do that and it's not like I want to leave those kids all helpless or anything but— I just can't deal with that sort of responsibility.

Dazai hums. “So, the freaking out thing? I’d rather you do that more often, by the way, since it looks like otherwise I’m severely left out of the loop on what you’re thinking. Just because I can read how stressed you are doesn't mean I know how to fix that.”

“I’m fine,” Chuuya insists. “You don’t need to concern yourself or whatever, I’m literally the *most fine* one in this house. All the rest of you are too messed up to worry about me— no offense.”

“Offense taken. *So much* offense taken.” Dazai pulls his hand away, but instead of drawing back to himself, he pinches Chuuya’s cheek instead. Chuuya finally lets his fingers drop from his partner’s wrist. “You would not believe *how much* offense I’m taking right now.”

“Shut up,” Chuuya says. “You know what I meant. Anyway, like I said, I’m fine. But I can’t handle the responsibility of another 5 kids in our house, alright?”

Dazai sighs and smooths his palm across Chuuya’s cheek again, gliding his thumb across the apple of it as though to soothe the pinch. “You don’t have to,” he says, and his expression is utterly unreadable. He brings his other hand up too, hesitant, but after a second of awkward hovering between them he brings it to Chuuya’s arm and steps forward so they’re facing each other. “They’re not your responsibility— no one is. None of us are, either. Those are *OdaSaku*’s kids anyway, I was just suggesting that we live together so that they’d be around people who know how to fight.”

“Right,” Chuuya says, and lowers his eyes. He focuses on Dazai’s shirt instead of his face.

“That means all four of us,” Dazai says. “Not just you. Ryuunosuke, Gin and I can hold our own too, don’t go thinking we’re all incompetent.”

“I’m not,” Chuuya responds, to the gray of the garment.

The hand on his cheek slides down to his chin and tilts his face up until blue eyes meet brown.

“*Chuuya*,” Dazai says. “Are you paying attention? This will all be on the test.”

“Don’t be a smartass. I heard you, and we can do that, I guess. It’s probably the smart move, or whatever. It’s fine.”

“You don’t sound so sure, carrot-top.”

Chuuya scowls. “I said it was *fine*, alright? Drop it; we can move in together or whatever, you’re right anyway. It’ll be safer for the kids, and I’m just overthinking everything.”

Dazai sighs again, more dramatic and injected with levity this time, and he’s close enough that it stirs Chuuya’s hair. “And I thought you couldn’t even do that with your quantity of brain cells. Don’t stress yourself out over it, alright? You don’t have to be responsible for anyone alone.” Dazai brings his other hand down and then both are descending Chuuya’s arms, sliding over his dry elbows to his calloused palms, which Dazai takes hold of. Chuuya meets his gaze, startled.

He squeezes Chuuya’s hands. “Besides,” Dazai says, mouth twitching into a smile, “it’s not like you’ll ever have to do anything on your own. Standing right before you is yours truly, after all!”

It turns out that Dazai is right about him being soft, in both an unfortunate and predictable outcome.

Oda's kids are adorable. There are Katsumi and Yu who are the same age and have bubbly personalities and sweet tooths. There's Kousuke, who's the oldest and loudest, all brash and quick-tempered in a way that makes Ryuunosuke comment on how it's like having two Chuuya's now, except one of them is 8 and annoying— and the kids all dogpile him for the annoying comment, and Gin spends a solid five minutes on the floor laughing at how Ryuunosuke tries to push them away with his ability without accidentally snapping a limb off with Rashoumon's jaws.

There's Shinji too, who's a little quieter and who loves bugs, but is no less rambunctious. And then there's Sakura; sweet, tiny, 3 year old Sakura, who holds Chuuya's hand by the fingers and calls him *Chuu-nii* and Dazai *Osa-nii* and who has the most adorable grin in the world.

Chuuya has to spend a minute on his knees at that, overwhelmed, and when Dazai grins at him smugly he pulls on his foot and topples him, off-balance. Unfortunately, Dazai does end up falling onto him, and they end up in a tangle on the floor, Chuuya's head cushioned over someone's arm and Dazai's face planted on his chest. It takes multiple, *embarrassing* minutes to undo, as Oda looks down on them with amusement.

Mortifying moments aside, it seems that Chuuya's worries were all mostly ill-placed, even the ones about expenses. Once everything is sorted out, Oda's additional income means that within the next month, they move into a different apartment big enough for all of them. It is, in actuality, multiple units with the walls knocked down and stitched together. Even though it's further from both Dazai and Chuuya's part-time jobs, and has water stains along the molding and needs a hell of a cleaning at first, it's worth it for the way it has 4 bedrooms and 3 full bathrooms.

They get one mattress to share in each bedroom, since it's easier than individual futons and a better investment in the long run, and split up so it's two rooms between the kids— and Oda, whenever he stays the night, though that's usually only when he can't be there during the day and makes it off jobs at 2AM— and another for Ryuunosuke and Gin to share. The last one, with the connected bathroom, Dazai claims for Chuuya and himself.

The next few months develop into a routine.

Oda's kids are surprisingly self-sufficient, as it turns out, and the ones that go to grade school wake up by themselves in the morning to get dressed and pack their bags. Chuuya still doesn't trust them to make food for themselves, so he gets up early too and goes to load very simple lunches into bento boxes with Ryuunosuke. Gin usually sleeps in and only wakes up to help make a proper breakfast for the four of them after the kids have left on stomachs full of cereal and toast, and it's a 50-50 chance on whether Dazai wakes up with Chuuya or at halfway through said proper breakfast.

Dazai, apparently, sleeps a lot sounder and for longer with another body in bed. Chuuya had dragged his futon over and slept beside him during rough times often enough over the past year to know it helped, somewhat, but it's become increasingly obvious now that they have to sleep together every night on the same mattress.

Chuuya isn't going to complain about it, because even he has to admit that it's nicer to startle awake up from a nightmare about some catastrophe or the other from his eventful past, and already be in someone's arms. And because Dazai's been a lot better lately, too.

He's begun to suspect it's because of the kids, actually. They get off from school quickly enough, and Chuuya will come home from shifts at work to find them hanging off Dazai, trying to get him to help with their homework and asking him about random facts. It's like they're using him as some

sort of quiz app, the way Shinji will ask what the biggest animal is and Yu how to write the kanji for ‘tomorrow’.

It’s as though Dazai’s so distracted by them that most of the time, he doesn’t even have a moment to ruminate and get lost in his own thoughts. It should be exhausting, maybe, and it’s definitely not all sunshine and rainbows for him, as far as Chuuya can tell, but he seems pleased.

Sakaguchi visits more often, like this. He’ll come in with Oda on weekend mornings with a bag of groceries or melon buns, and watch as the redheads get into the kitchen and cook. Chuuya isn’t sure if he feels awkward about trying to help and integrate too deeply into their household, or if Sakaguchi is simply as awful of a cook as Dazai is, but he’s grateful for it since he feels strange enough bumping elbows with Oda as he goes to grab utensils.

Weekend strangeness doesn’t stop there. Even a month after moving in, Chuuya can’t get over the feeling of having kids hanging off him, and people who couldn’t feasibly be considered strangers anymore being at ease with him. It reminds him of the Sheep, partially, and also of his time with the mafia, in a distant sort of way. Like he’s standing at a beach, watching the tides wash in and out at his feet, and across the ocean is the glimmering outline of an island made of all his past memories, and friends, and family. A distant sort of familiarity.

So his weekends are coated with that, as he and Dazai sit on one of the two couches and help the kids with their homework, or go through job plans with Gin and Ryuunosuke, or ask Sakaguchi about the latest comings and goings of mafia activity in the area while Oda goes and puts Sakura to nap down the hallway.

It’s an afternoon like that, when Sakaguchi remarks, “There’s been a lot of unrest, I think. I don’t know much but I heard a rumor about Ozaki Kouyou— you were close with her, correct?”

Chuuya’s breath catches. “Did something happen,” he demands, trying to keep his cool. He hasn’t forgotten about Kouyou, even as long as it’s been. She was an unfathomably kind presence in his life, and one of the only reasons he’d gotten back on his feet from the pain of being betrayed by the Sheep. Poised, sharp, kind-hearted Kouyou, who is also extremely loyal to the Port Mafia, shouldn’t have rumors floating about her.

“Not as far as I can tell,” Sakaguchi replies. “I don’t know much, but I think it has less to do with her than some ward she might have to take in. It seems she was displeased about something regarding that, and the Boss made to threaten her.”

“*Interesting*.” Chuuya looks over to Dazai, whose eyes have sparked.

“You know something about this?” Chuuya asks.

Dazai shakes his head and grins, then drops an arm around Chuuya’s neck and lets all his weight fall onto him. “I’m flattered you think I’ve still got enough connections to know anything about this, but I’m afraid I’ve gone dull in old age.”

Chuuya snorts, and a wave of giggles goes down through the kids, who are all seated at the low coffee table with papers and pencils. Dazai’s grin widens. “Aw, see, got you to smile again!”

“You’re a butt,” Chuuya says. He’d learned to censor his language within the first week of these new living arrangements when Sakura had immediately spat out a “fuck” in front of Oda, causing

the man to gape, Dazai to burst out laughing, Ryuunosuke and Gin to choke, and Chuuya himself to go bright red and wish he could sink right down through the floor in shame.

“So that means all I am to you is a cute butt?” Dazai pouts and Chuuya swats him again, this time in the shoulder, and Sakaguchi coughs from where he’s sitting lopsided on Yu’s bean bag chair. Yu himself lets out an *‘ew’* in chorus with Kousuke and Katsumi. “Anyway, don’t go worrying your pretty little head too much about it; Kouyou-nee is Mori-san’s closest and most valued executive. He wouldn’t do anything to her.”

Dazai untangles his limbs from Chuuya and stands, ruffling his hair until it falls messily into Chuuya’s eyes, and skips away down the hall saying that he’s going to see Oda.

Chuuya scowls and cards his fingers through his hair, trying to comb it back neatly into its regular style. Sakaguchi is staring at him with raised eyebrows when he turns back.

“What,” Chuuya asks warily, and when the man simply says “*anata?*”, feels blood rush to his face.

“I don’t know either, ok, he’s weird like that.”

“Dazai-kun *is* weird,” Sakaguchi gives, “but he usually has a reason for being so.”

“The reason is making fun of me.”

“*Hm*.” Sakaguchi leans over and sets his elbows on his knees, then steeples his fingers together. The serious look over the gleam of his glasses is ruined by the way his body is skewed off-balance by the poorly shaped bean bag he sits on. “I don’t recall Dazai-kun ever being fond of those types of shirts before, by the way.”

“Lazy idiot hasn’t done his laundry yet. He still has clothes lying all over our room.”

It’s true, Dazai is notoriously awful about laundry, and has gotten even worse about it lately. Instead, he keeps stealing Chuuya’s band shirts and graphic tee’s that are all just *slightly* too short for himself. It means that whenever he raises his arms to reach for something on a high shelf, the shirts raise and reveal a strip of bandaged skin.

“How fascinating,” Sakaguchi says, and then turns to look at the kids present. “Do you think you think those two are dating?”

Chuuya splutters.

Shinji looks up and taps his crayon against his chin thoughtfully. “You mean like with kissing? Like grown-ups do?”

“Oh!” Kousuke shoots his hand up lightning fast. “I thought they were married at first!”

Chuuya fucking dies. Metaphorically, his soul has left his body.

“How old did you think I was, brat,” he snaps.

“Like 30!”

Sakaguchi snorts.

“Oooh, me too, me too,” Yu says excitedly. “Because you have jobs and everything! It’s *super weird* that Oda-san calls you guys kids—”

“Kids can’t get married though,” Shinji says proudly, as though it’s a fact he’s incredibly triumphant about learning. “Dazai-nii says you’ll be old enough after both your birthdays, though.”

“I wanna be the flower boy,” Katsumi says, standing up from his seat. He does a little twirl, which Chuuya might have been able to appreciate the cuteness of if he weren’t currently losing his goddamn mind. “Like on TV!”

“Which one of you is gonna wear the dress,” Yu asks. “There are TV shows where they go *all* over the place trying on so many different dresses, it’s so cool!”

“Neither of them has to wear a dress if they don’t want to,” Sakaguchi says matter of factly. The situation might be more bearable if he looked amused rather than calmly talking about Chuuya’s non-existent wedding with Dazai fucking Osamu of all people. “They could wear kimonos too, if they wanted to. Traditional weddings are still popular.”

“I wanna wear a kimono,” Kousuke yells, beaming. “They’re so cool!”

“We could ask Sakunosuke about getting you guys some yukata then, if it’s in the budget.”

Kousuke cheers.

“Hold on,” Chuuya snaps, as his circuitry finally rewires and his ability to speak boots up again. “There aren’t going to be any kimonos, or dresses, or tuxedos or flower boys—” Katsumi deflates — “ because Dazai and I are *not* getting married! We’re not even dating you guys, what the f—*heck*, what the heck!”

“But you guys sleep together!”

“Yeah,” Shinji nods, agreeing with Yu. “My parents slept in the same bedroom away from me because that’s what married people do!”

“And Dazai-nii always calls you pretty and stuff,” Kousuke says, and wrinkles his nose. “It’s gross! You guys are all gross together!”

“We are *not* gross,” Chuuya despairs. He’s 17. Please god, just take him out right now, fucking smite him, he’s 17 and shouldn’t be having to listen to this slander about how he apparently looks married to his criminal partner. He does not want to be aged 30 years in the eyes of a bunch of toddlers.

“Gross, you say?” Sakaguchi tilts his head. “How so?”

This time it’s Katsumi who shoots his hand up in the air again and waves it wildly. “The other day, I woke up at night to go take a pee and I saw Dazai-nii and Chuuya-nii *super* close together on the couch! Chuuya-nii was sleeping but Dazai-nii looked like he was about to kiss his head like they do in shoujo anime.”

Kousuke groans. “Ew, see, I *told* you they’re all gross!”

Chuuya wants out of this conversation.

“That is pretty gross, indeed.” Sakaguchi looks back over at Chuuya. He meets him dead in the eyes and doesn’t even have the decency to smirk. The straight-face is maddening.

“We are *not* dating,” Chuuya huffs, and stands from his seat. “I’m going to find Ryuu and Gin, but if I find out you guys said all this stuff to Dazai too later, then I’m changing the chore chart so you’ll all be on garbage duty the rest of your lives!”

“You can’t do that,” Yu shrieks, while Chuuya goes to walk away, and a chorus of agreement comes with the statement.

Chuuya pivots to face them. “If you guys all get to call me old then I guess I do have the authority to that after all.”

He sticks his tongue out at them and then leaves the room to another round of whines.

Oda calls him over, one day, after he’s done reading a bedtime story and all the kids have fallen asleep in the same bed. He closes the book gently and sets it back in the small bookshelf he’d brought over from their old home, and looks back at where Chuuya is leaning against the hallway wall. He was scrolling through his phone, half-listening to the story and mostly standing guard in case some said they were thirsty as an excuse to get up; Chuuya could go and grab the water himself while Oda made sure no one was jostling around or dragging out bedtime.

“Thank you,” Oda whispers, coming to a standstill in the doorway, a meter away, “for agreeing to this.”

Chuuya shrugs. “It was Dazai’s idea anyway, and they're not trouble or anything.”

Oda raises an eyebrow. “They’re good kids, but I wouldn’t go as far as to say they’re angels.”

Chuuya flushes. He coughs into his fist. “Right. Well, I meant they’re fine, honestly. I like having them around. And I know Dazai does too.”

“That, I didn’t expect,” Oda admits, and then smiles. As much as he insists he’s no one’s dad, the curve of his mouth is endlessly patient and paternal. Chuuya’s not above admitting that he’s come to understand, lately, why Dazai loves Oda so much.

With a mellow, comforting disposition and having genuinely earned the title of a good person, being around Oda Sakunosuke is a bit like standing at an oasis in the middle of a maelstrom.

The calming effect might also be partially from the fact that the blunts he always carries are fantastic quality too, but that’s beside the point, and more of Dazai and Sakaguchi’s expertise than Chuuya’s. He still finds it a startling amusing facet of Oda’s personality, though.

“Yeah, I don’t know if he did either. Gin and Ryuunosuke like the kids too, even if they sort of use Ryuu like a punching bag.”

“I’m not sure how to get them to stop that,” Oda muses, “but he looks like he's having fun.”

“So much fun,” Chuuya agrees. “Every time Kousuke-kun jumps on his back and sends him to the floor I can see how much he loves it.”

“He’s a feisty one,” Oda says, and turns his head to check on the kids again. Since it seems like everyone’s asleep, he steps into the hallway and closes the door gently behind him. “I should be going now. Tell Dazai I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye, alright?”

“You got it,” Chuuya responds, because Dazai went to sleep early today after coming back from work. The Akutagawas crashed with him, just in case he wasn’t feeling well, while Chuuya cleared out the dishes from dinner that Oda helped make.

Chuuya follows Oda out to see him grab his coat from where it’s thrown over the back of the couch and put it on. Before he goes, he turns to Chuuya one last time, and pats his shoulder. His hand is warm, even through Chuuya’s sweatshirt.

“I know I’ve said it before,” he says, “but you’re a good kid. Dazai’s lucky to have you, Chuuya. And you’re lucky to have him too.”

Time is harder to track in birthdays now, because there are so many people in the house that there’s almost one a month, and everything passes in a sort of blur.

Sakura turns 4 to a surprise party where they get confetti stuck in such inopportune places that it takes Chuuya an hour to clean out, using For The Tainted Sorrow to reach above the fridge and cabinets and lift the couch in the air so Dazai can vacuum underneath; Kousuke turns 9 and Oda brings him to a nearby park with all his friends from school; Ryuunosuke turns 16 and gets chased around the house with handfuls of cake as the kids try and smother his face, and Gin gets crowned a winner when she smears red frosting all in his hair.

Dazai laughs harder at that than he has any right to, honestly, and then gets caked right back in the face too. He turns to Chuuya with a pout, who’s become the one laughing until his guts hurt, and smothers him in a hug that means getting crumbs and frosting all over Chuuya’s hair and neck and the collar of his shirt.

For Sakura’s birthday, she got a model airplane and a dress-up doll. For Kousuke’s, a baseball mitt from them and baseball lessons from Oda. For Ryuunosuke’s, thrifted sneakers and a switchblade from Chuuya and Dazai, respectively, the promise not to clamber all over him for a week from the kids, and the mending and embroidering of his favorite jacket that got frayed and moth-eaten from Gin.

And for Chuuya’s 18th birthday— he gets a refurbished iPod from Dazai, a jaunty black fedora from the Akutagawa’s, an array of homemade bead bracelets and cards from the kids, and a new child to add to his home from Kouyou.

Chapter End Notes

fun fact: the working title for this fic was ‘Nakahara Chuuya’s Home for Wayward Children’ even tho it isnt a seanan mcguire au and ive never actually read her books lol

anyway, i have no goddamn idea why this was so hard to write but there are a solid half-dozen versions of dazai and chuuya's kitchen conversation from the beginning with slightly different

paths of conversations and of physical touch. one of them has chuuya accidentally activating his ability bc his freakout went off the deep-end, and the dazai touching chuuya's cheek thing was a holdover from that version.

next chapter: you guys find out that i don't actually know the canon timeline well at all, and also the mimic incident occurs. its gonna be a doozy, but i refuse to split it up into 2 chapters so it might take a bit to update.

little shards of sky

Chapter Summary

> Kyouka is trying her best, and as hard as that is, things are fine for quite some time. And then, Chuuya gets a call and things turn not so fine.

Chapter Notes

> i thought this chapter would be like half this size and not 10k but uh, hopefully that makes up for the long wait (Disclaimer for a somewhat graphic description of a wound about halfway through, and implied violence later on)
> edit: apparently i posted a version of this with typos and didn't even realize until like multiple days passed lmao but yeah that's fixed now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The days have been getting colder, paradoxically, even though it's supposed to be nearing summer.

Or maybe that's just how Chuuya feels tonight, standing in the parking lot behind a strip of still-lit stores in the dense downtown of Yokohama. He pulls his hat further down by the brim of it, shadowing his eyes, and checks his phone. Half-past midnight, which means Kouyou is unexpectedly, unusually late.

When Dazai had first shown him the email, the day after his birthday and holding sparse text, Chuuya's heart had frozen. Ozaki Kouyou is not the type of woman who asks for favors, especially not from disciples nor of this variety. Chuuya had stared at it, worried about it, wondered what there was to consider.

When Dazai had asked him if he should even reply to the email, Chuuya had looked at him in muted disbelief. There wasn't any chance for him to refuse, after all.

Now, it takes another ten minutes before Chuuya hears soft footsteps— staggered, poorly disguising two sets as one— and they arrive.

Kouyou cuts a stark figure, even now. Her kimono is a deep green, an attempt to blend into the darkness without being suspicious, yet her hair is still a glowing beacon of coral under the streetlights. In one hand she's holding a large laptop bag, likely stuffed with clothes and other necessities. Behind her, he can just barely make out a dark shape.

Chuuya hurries over to them and Kouyou's severe face blooms into a smile.

"It's been a long while," she says, and sets a delicate hand on his arm. It's not a hug, but it still reads painfully affectionate.

“Ane-san,” Chuuya greets, strained. He clears his throat. “So…”

Kouyou removes her hand and uses it instead to sweep the skirt of her kimono in closer to herself. The fabric *swishes* and reveals a small girl who goes up no higher than her hip, wearing a floral *haori* over a t-shirt and leggings. Around her neck is a flip-phone on a cord.

“This,” Kouyou says, sounding fond and unbearably sad, “is Izumi Kyouka. Say hello to your new elder brother, child.”

Kyouka ducks her head, but makes no move to say anything. Chuuya falls to one knee and takes his hat off, holding it to his chest in deference, and a gesture that she hopefully perceives as safe. “It’s nice to meet you. My name is Chuuya.” And when she only stares at the ground, he spots the bunny-shaped ornaments tying her dark hair into pigtails and tries, “Do you like rabbits?”

That makes her look up. She bobs her head the slightest, cautious or timid. Chuuya grins, and says, “Me too; they’re really cute, aren’t they? Did you ever want a pet rabbit?”

Kyouka nods again, more firmly, and finally looks Chuuya in the eyes.

“You know,” he says, glancing up at where Kouyou is watching them bemusedly and then back to Kyouka, cupping his hand around his mouth like he’s sharing a secret. “After a few years, we could maybe get you a pet rabbit.”

Kyouka’s eyes go wide, blue-gray turned sparkling. “Really?” Her voice is soft, barely loud enough to hear.

“Yeah. I can talk to my— partner and we can make it happen. Maybe a cute little white one, that you could pet and give little treats.”

“Brown,” Kyouka says. “With spots.”

“A brown pet bunny with spots,” Chuuya corrects.

Kyouka fists her hands into the fabric of her *haori*, then cranes her neck all the way up to look at Kouyou beside her. “He said we could get a pet,” she whispers.

Kouyou pats her head indulgently. “I heard. Your new Onii-san is a very nice person, isn’t he?”

Kyouka nods, and turns back to him shyly. “Thank you,” she says, cheeks flushed pink, and Chuuya stands again, abashed.

He places his hat back onto his head and murmurs out, “You’re welcome,” before turning to Kouyou. He reaches for the bag in her hand, and she lets him have it. “You’re sure about this?” he asks lowly, even though she wouldn’t have asked if she weren’t, and Kouyou looks at him with tired eyes.

“It’s for the best. This might have been unthinkable before but…. You’ve seen the light,” Kouyou says, and it’s not bitterness in her tone so much as what might be longing. Chuuya stares at her in shock. “You’ve made it to the other side and you’ve even brought others with you. It's selfish of me to even ask this, but now, I need you to bring another young one as well.”

Kouyou takes a deep breath and grips his shoulder once more, tight enough to hurt and yet with so much emotions it may as well be a caress. “Help her live, Chuuya-kun. Let her grow up

unburdened and happy. It is entirely too much to ask of you, but still. I know that you can."

She lets go and steps back, and before he can even think of what to say, "Goodbye Kyouka, Chuuya. I hope we can meet again."

"Ane-san!" he calls into the night, but she's already walking away.

"So," Dazai says, from where he's laying on his side on their bed, head propped up on one fist. "How old are you, anyway?"

Kyouka fidgets, drawing herself in until she's even smaller, hugging her legs to herself. She sits at the corner of the bed a meter away from Dazai and watches Chuuya nervously as he flits around the room, setting her things in the connected bathroom and figuring out what extra necessities they'll have to buy for her later. Since it's so late at night, she'll share their bed, but after that Kyouka'll get her own bedroom with Sakura, and whichever of her brothers decides to spend the night there that day.

When there's no answer to his question Dazai sighs, dramatically long-suffering, and waves a hand in the space between them, airing grievances away. "Come on, Kyouka-chan, you can answer. I don't bite. Well, unless you're Chuuya, then I'd *love* —"

Chuuya wacks him on the head with a pillow. "Don't be weird in front of her," he says, and then plops down on the bed next to him.

Kyouka lets out an aborted huff of air at the interaction, like she's trying not to laugh. Chuuya takes the opportunity to ask, in a gentler tone, "Can we know your age though? Here, I'm 18, and he's 17." Chuuya points at each of them respectively.

"I'll be 18 soon though! My birthday is in June," Dazai says, then scoots forward and rests his head in Chuuya's lap, at the crux of his knee. Chuuya has half a mind to grab the pillow and gently whack him again, when Kyouka answers.

"My birthday is in November," she says. "I'm almost 10 and ½ right now."

That's older than what he was expecting. Chuuya assumed she was maybe 7, by how small she is and how shy she looks, but evidently, she's the oldest of even Oda's children.

Dazai, apparently, had thought the same thing, because he lets out a whistle. "Looks like Kouyou-nee has a habit of picking the runts." Chuuya pinches the shell of his ear between two fingers, and Dazai winces and glances up at him. He pouts, and Chuuya looks away and lets go.

"When did she get you anyway?" Dazai continues. "I have to say I'm curious about who decided to drag you into the mafia."

"I lived with Ane-san for one month."

Dazai waits, and when she doesn't continue, "Yes, but who else was there? There has to be someone who found you. Or did you join the mafia some other way?"

"There wasn't anyone," Kyouka insists. She's looking down again, and it's obvious to them that she's withdrawing back into her shell.

“That’s alright,” Chuuya says. “Sorry about Dazai, he seems to forget that not everyone joins mafias *on their own decision*.” Dazai huffs, as though he wasn't the one that dragged Chuuya in back in the day, and he ignores the other and continues, “Are you sleepy yet?”

“No.”

Dazai and he exchange glances. “Do you want to do anything?” Chuuya asks. “You could go through your stuff, or watch the TV as long as we keep it quiet.”

“Or you could have a snack. How long has it been since you had dinner?”

She perks up at that. “What snacks do you have?”

“Well,” Dazai starts, and then a moment goes by where he’s stuck. “You know what,” he settles on, “It’ll just be easier to show you.” He picks his head off Chuuya’s knee and gets off the bed, and Kyouka slides off too. Chuuya rolls his eyes in disbelief, because Dazai not knowing what they have left in the house is typical, and flops back onto the bed. He waves a hand to shoo them away.

He starts to doze off into a half-sleep, thinking about the possibilities of how such a young girl could even be part of the mafia. The only people he knows who are in the same situation are Q, who’s a special case considering the dangers of their ability, and Elise, who’s an equally special yet drastically different case in that Chuuya had never seen her anywhere but at Mori’s side.

In her email, Kouyou hadn’t said anything about Kyouka’s past either, beyond that she was an orphan. Then again, the message had been brief, containing only the necessary information, timing and location, and notice that Kouyou would be wiring them money to a remote bank account each month so they could afford to take care of Kyouka.

Chuuya wishes he’d been a bit more forceful earlier, that he’d been able to get more information about the situation, but instead he’s left here, with the promise of a pet a few years down the line and a little girl who’s obviously been through *something* daunting.

Integrating Kyouka into their household doesn’t take much effort, mainly because the kids are very eager to have another playmate.

She’s lucky the next day is a Tuesday, since it means most of the following week the kids are at school and she can get used to everyone a bit more gradually. It’s not that Kyouka has either a shy nor cold personality so much as that she seems to have trouble letting loose with the others. Her gestures are always stilted and hesitant, like there’s a thin, unbreachable film between her and the rest of the world.

Sakaguchi mentioned, the weekend that he dropped in incredibly briefly for to do nothing more than to deliver a bag of curry buns, that getting her to a therapist might be a good idea. They don’t have the means to do that right now, for obvious reasons, but knowing she needs one due to whatever past trauma she went through is disheartening in all the worst ways.

It’s not like she never gets used to them, though.

As awkward as it is sometimes, she still lets herself be guided around by Sakura’s chubby hands, and colors with Katsumi afterschool, and even lets Oda braid her hair when he’s over.

Which is exactly now, with her sitting on the floor between Oda's legs where he's perched behind her on the couch. Mirroring them are Gin, tapping away at her phone, and Ryuunosuke, trying to teach Oda how to do it.

"Not like that," Ryuunouske chides, "You hold this strand with your opposite hand and then pull it over." He demonstrates it, once, then undoes the action and demonstrates again more slowly. "Oda-san, are you even paying attention?"

"I am," he mutters, and furrows his brows while he stares hard at the back of Kyouka's head. He repeats what Ryuunosuke just did, then takes a strand from the other side and tries to do the same.

"Now shift your hands," Ryuunosuke says, tapping a finger on Oda's thumb. He's wearing a pale pink hoodie, something that suits his personality as well as the actual scene he's participating in. It used to be Dazai's before he'd shot up in height so much it almost turned into a crop-top.

When it'd been handed it down to Ryuunosuke he'd stared at it with wide-eyed awe and worn it for almost a week straight, before Chuuya threatened him with the promise of tossing it into the washing machine with Ryuunosuke still inside.

Oda makes a sound of affirmation, and goes to follow the instructions. He attempts to shift his hold on the sections of hair to hold the opposite side, but then everything falls apart. Strands of dark hair unravel and spill over Kyouka's shoulders, and though the others can't see, Chuuya is perfectly positioned on the smaller couch to bear witness to her twitching mouth, barely concealing her amusement.

"You messed it up," Ryuunosuke states, which is indeed true.

"My bad," Oda says, and rubs at the back of his head. "This is harder than it looks."

"No it isn't. Even I can do it."

"Ah, well," Oda drags out, and never finishes the sentence.

Chuuya snorts and stands, walking over to them and leaning over Kyouka. "Let me try instead. Uh, if that's okay with you?"

Kyouka nods, and Oda scoots over on the couch so he's sandwiched Ryuunosuke and Chuuya. "Here's the problem," he says, and pulls all her hair up to see the nape of her neck. "There's still a bunch of hair left under here."

"That's not the only problem," Ryuunosuke sniffs, as Chuuya sweeps out a bunch of strands trapped under her necklace. Or the cord that passes for a necklace, with Kyouka's phone attached.

"Why don't you take that off?" Gin asks, looking over and pointing to the phone. Even though her voice is gentle, no more than a suggestion, Kyouka still flinches.

There's a moment of hesitance that rings round the room.

"You don't have to if it's important to you," Oda says, quiet.

Kyouka shakes her head, but doesn't say anything.

Ryuunosuke speaks, cautious but still prodding, "So it's not important then?"

“It—” Kyouka starts, then quiets. Enough time passes that Chuuya thinks she won’t continue and opens his mouth to wrap it all up, but then she speaks. “My ability comes through here,” she mumbles. “She only listens to commands that come through the phone.”

So Kyouka does have an ability. It seems obvious in hindsight, as there’s little other reason for someone so young to get involved in mafia business, yet no one had mentioned anything of the sort. But wait—

“She?” Gin asks, catching onto it too.

Kyouka just hunches her shoulders though, unwilling to answer. Chuuya tries to think of something to change the subject.

“So, did you pick out your phone by yourself when you learned about your ability?” he asks. “I like the color.”

Kyouka shakes her head, but her posture straightens up somewhat. “It… was my mom’s. It’s the only thing I have from them.”

Chuuya’s starting to piece together the story, now. Dead parents and an ability that’s easily exploitable by others. A lethal combination for anyone who happens to find themselves even adjacent to the underground when they enter orphanhood.

“It’s a wonderful keepsake,” Oda says, and when Chuuya looks over at him his face is lined with sorrow. He looks older than his years, all of a sudden, and the way that strikes Chuuya unprepared is almost enough to buckle him over from the weight of all the tragedy right in the room, in the house.

Chuuya swallows the hard lump in his throat and stiffens his spine, shakes it all off him and sets his shoulders. There’s more than enough burdens between the lot of them to afford himself to break.

Chuuya starts pulling extra shifts at the restaurant. It’s not that they need the extra money, since with Kouyou’s contributions the past couple months they can even afford to spend on random items absolutely no one needs, like the extra giant balloons and singing candles for Dazai’s recent 18th birthday. However, things have been so quiet lately that he’s been getting antsy. He needs things to do with his hands and feet, and if running around from table to table and learning how to toss fried rice in a wok is what helps, then so be it.

He’s coming back from one of those shifts, an early morning one he dropped in on because Oda had stayed the night and was there today to take care of the rush to school, when he steps into the house to surprising silence. It’s around noon, so the other’s are already at their own part-times or doing whatever it is Oda does, and just Dazai and Kyouka are left.

Still, there’s usually something always going on in the house, either the TV on or someone sitting on the couch and messing around, or the sounds of a video game from one of the bedrooms.

Chuuya kicks his shoes off sore feet and steps into his house slippers, throwing his keys into the little basket by the door. He checks the kitchen first, but no one’s there even though the lights are on. He opens the fridge and grabs a juice box at random, and is just stabbing it with a straw when he slips.

Chuuya squeezes the box so hard juice goes splattering all down his shirt, and just barely manages to catch himself on the countertop. He swears under his breath and goes to scowl at the floor when he sees it: a splash of red across the tile.

He whips his head up and frantically scans the kitchen, sees a flash of a metal knife and his feet are already moving.

"*Dazai*," he yells into the house, sprinting down the hallway and spotting an open, glowing bathroom door.

Dazai jumps when Chuuya barges in, stunned. "You're back alrea—"

"What happened?" Chuuya demands, hands hovering over the other. Dazai's leaning over the sink, water running red as he washes what looks like an awful cut on his palm. " *Jesus*, are you okay? Did you— was this on purpose?"

Dazai's eyebrows shoot up into his bangs. "If it was on purpose it wouldn't look like this. Besides," he turns back to the sink, and turns the tap off. His palm glistens under the overhead lights, bright drops of water turning pink as blood slowly oozes from the cut. "I have Kyouka-chan with me today."

Chuuya drops his hovering hands, and instead watches as Dazai pulls some tissues out of a pack and balls them up, pressing them against his palm. "Where is she, now?"

"In our bedroom. She felt bad about this so I let her get the first-aid kit."

"Felt bad?" The tissues turn soggy so Chuuya grabs some more and brushes aside Dazai's hand, pressing down hard on the entire wad with both thumbs.

Dazai winces and draws in a sharp breath. "Yeah," he says, "She wanted to use the new pack of stationery we got so I tried to open it. Turns out, sawing at plastic packaging with a kitchen knife is a great way to both not open a stapler, *and* to cut your hand open in the process.

"You're an idiot," Chuuya says. "You should have just waited for me."

"So you could just cut yourself too?" Dazai looks down at him from the corner of his eye. "It's fine, I trust you with sharp, pointy things about as much as you do me."

"That's not what I said," Chuuya insists, and spares a glance back at him. "And I'm stronger anyway, I could've just used my ability to open it or something. No need for anyone to get hurt."

"I can do things on my own." Dazai tries to pull his hand away, but Chuuya holds tight, pressing just that little bit harder. "You can't always be there," he hisses. "And everything's trial and error anyway."

"But I'm here *now* , and you're the one who's hurt because you couldn't wait a while longer!" Dazai's hand is trembling, Chuuya realizes— is he pressing too hard? But then—

"I don't need to wait," Dazai spits out, "you're not my fucking babysitter!"

Chuuya flinches, and drops the hand.

The back of Dazai's knuckles hit the sink with a painful sound, and the tissues roll off his palm in sticky pink and red messes, melting in the leftover water in the basin.

At least even Dazai looks taken aback by his own words. "That's not what I meant," he starts, and Chuuya interrupts, temper breaking.

"Well, how the hell else am I supposed to feel after all this time?"

"Come on," Dazai sighs, and picks up a fallen wad of tissues. He places it back on his palm, mopping up droplets of blood that are swelling, and then holds it down. "I didn't mean it like that, alright, and I know you don't think that either."

"How did you mean it, then," Chuuya snaps, and crosses his arms. "I'm just trying to help."

"And sometimes," Dazai says, tone more gentle but still full of emotion he won't let out, "that help is overbearing. I know you worry, but sometimes you're unreasonable."

"I— I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I just don't want you to get hurt."

"I know. But I'm not useless, and sometimes, you kind of act like I am."

Chuuya flounders. "I don't— I don't try to." Dazai hums, acknowledging him but not saying anything, or even looking at him. Chuuya swallows thickly, and waits a moment to gather himself. "I know you're not. Sorry. "I'll… keep this in mind." He scrubs a hand through his hair. "I'll fix this. What do you want me to do instead?"

Dazai finally looks up, "For one, trust me more, and try not to freak out about things. Just talk to me about stuff that's on your mind and let me help. And, it'd be nice if we both kept our voices down, probably." His gaze flickers down, and Chuuya looks beyond him, out the door.

There, Kyouka stands, holding a box with first-aid supplies in her hands and looking terribly small in the doorway. Her shadow stretches long behind her in the glow of the bathroom. She's staring, frozen.

"I'm sorry," is the first thing she says when Chuuya turns to her. "I shouldn't have asked Dazai-san to open it."

Shit. "You heard all that?" Chuuya asks.

Kyouka nods, stiff, and holds out the box. Chuuya takes it then steps back so she can enter the bathroom too. She does so after a moment of deliberation, hesitant.

"It's not your fault," he tells her, placing a hand on her head, and it bows, making it impossible to read her face. "We were just having a stupid argument, you didn't do anything."

"But if I didn't ask, then Dazai-san wouldn't have gotten hurt."

"Hey–" Chuuya starts, but Dazai interrupts him.

"Kyouka-chan," he says, voice firm. "It was my own decision to do what I did. You didn't have anything to do with it. Chuuya here is overdramatic, but no one's going to die of a tiny little cut, alright?"

“You’re still hurt,” She says, and her hands fly up to the phone around her neck. Her fingers close around it, so hard her knuckles turn white.

“Dazai’ll be okay,” Chuuya says, wrapping bandages over the cotton pad he’d just placed on the other’s palm. “He’s been through worse and he’s still here, right?” He takes a steadying breath, and the question’s almost for himself, at this point.

“Exactly,” Dazai confirms, and flexes his hand when Chuuya’s done. He lifts it to show Kyouka. “See? Can’t even feel anything.”

Kyouka lifts a hand, then stops it in the air. Dazai leans down and straightens her fingers, then gives her a little high five, patting their palms together even though it has to sting. “Alright,” she says finally, and lets Dazai herd her out the door.

“Yup,” he says, and glances back at Chuuya when he speaks. “Nothing to worry about.”

Still standing in the bathroom with the red-stained tissues and opened first-aid kit, Chuuya bites the inside of his cheek and forces himself to repeat, aloud, “Nothing to worry about.”

It’s an extremely ordinary day when everything goes to shit.

Chuuya is on his shift at the restaurant, picking up empty bowls and plates to bring back and put into the industrial-sized sink, getting ready to grab some gloves and get scrubbing, when he takes a bathroom break. He goes to the break room for a minute after, just to check and see if his phone’s charged enough to slip back into his pocket while he works, when he sees a new voicemail from Oda.

He hits play and puts the phone to his ear and that’s when the world stops.

A rushing in his ear, and then a panting voice, breaking and spitting out fractured sentences between ragged breathing. “*There’s a problem* ,” Oda is saying, “*Ozaki told me— I can’t come back now but I need you to—”* The line crackles, and then there's a banging sound coupled with a low groan. Oda bites out into the receiver, *“Chuuya, please, the kids—”* and then the message cuts off.

The lunch hour din of utensils and chatter and the noise of the kitchen all fall mute in the background in the wake of the voicemail. Chuuya stands frozen, feet planted to the floor with slow-dawning fear. His legs feel like lead. Heavy, bolted to the tile. There’s panicky ice in his gut but his fingers are painfully slow and clumsy when he navigates his phone. He calls Oda’s number back, waits through the rings, and gets a dial tone. Goes through the motions again and calls Dazai’s, who’s home with the kids now, and a familiar, cheery cacophony tells him to leave a message.

He goes back to Oda’s voicemail and checks the time and sees, to his utter fucking horror, that it was sent *twenty minutes ago*.

That’s what snaps him out of it. He stuffs his phone into his pocket and tears his apron off, and sprints over to the kitchen to shout at the owner that he needs to leave now, that he has a family emergency, and the elderly man just nods at him, startled, as he takes off.

The metro would take too long, so Chuuya runs out back behind the store and activates his ability, scales the wall and uses the side of it to push off and shoot straight up into the sky.

He pulls out his phone one more time as he leaps across rooftops, hoping with frantic desperation that at least Akutagawa or Gin will pick up their phones, but there's absolutely nothing. He gets sent to a voicemail-box over and over, even though everyone should be home doing nothing, and *what the hell is going on*? All he's left to do as the seconds tick by is remember that it's been over twenty minutes since the call, more than twenty fucking minutes that were wasted. Chuuya should've been checking his phone. He should have picked up Oda's call and spoken to him, gotten more information on the situation, done *something*.

But now he's still a few minutes away from home and each minute feels like an hour, because all he can do is bear the full force of the images flashing in his mind. A guerilla team sent in, or the Black Lizard, gone to set a bomb or to assassinate or to shoot up the entire place in a message to him. The images of a dozen little bodies, unmoving and piled up on the floor, too small to ever deserve falling still and broken like that, like discarded dolls.

Just like two years ago, hundreds of bloody bodies littering the streets, Chuuya's own people who he'd been in charge of and was supposed to protect just like now, the flames of their lives all put out.

And this time it's *children*, it's little kids like Sakura and Yu and Kyouka, and it's Gin and Akutagawa, and it's *Dazai* too, who he'd given up everything for, who he'd still give up everything for to never see his lifeless form with his own two eyes.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Chuuya's eyes are burning, and it's not just from the sting of the wind.

Finally, finally, he lands near their home, in an alley a few buildings away, and takes off running out and down the street. Outside there are cars, parked haphazardly and in a hurry, still running and spitting out fumes. The exhaust does little to hide the familiar burnt scent of gunpowder and iron-rich blood in the air.

Chuuya doesn't need to break down the front door, because it's already been blown off its hinges. There's furniture upturned, the couch is slashed and leaking stuffing, and a few bodies lead deeper into the house. All adult bodies, thankfully, people in suits indicative of Port Mafia origin.

A *bang!* and a scream tear through the air and Chuuya's heart misses a beat. He takes off but his leg catches and he falls to the floor, hard, cheek banging into the coffee table and wrist snapping back on the ground.

Holding his ankle in a vice grip is a white-knuckled hand, and the groggy face of a man staring up at him. Chuuya takes no more than seconds to send For The Tainted Sorrow down into the man's body and crush him into the ground, before yanking his ankle free and stomping backward into his head.

There's another scream from deep into the house, this time higher-pitched, and it sounds like it might be from one of the children. Chuuya scrambles to his feet and runs towards it. He goes down the hall from room to room and there are more *bangs* now, the sounds of gunshots, and the sound of hiccuping crying, and panicked images flood him all over again.

The children, little frames shot by rifles, Ryuunosuke over Gin to protect her from a hail of bullets, Dazai standing in the middle of it all and weathering the storm without even fear on his face.

I'm sorry, Chuuya thinks to Kouyou, who entrusted him with Kyouka's protection, to Gin with Ryuunosuke's, to Oda with his children, to Dazai with his own life.

Outside the last bedroom, there's only the sound of another scream ripping through the air. Chuuya lets his ability flow through him, ready to activate Corruption, and bursts in.

The first thing he notices is warm blood, splashing across his face.

Next, Dazai's smiling face through the airborne rivers of red.

Then, the heavy weight of another body slamming into him.

Chuuya catches it by the arms as the body goes down, barely staying his ground, and someone calls out "*Chuuya-san!*"

Chuuya looks up again just in time to see the last man standing lose an arm to a beautiful demon with a blade.

"That'll do, Demon Snow," Dazai says, and snaps the phone held up to his ear shut. He puts it in his back pocket and pats Kyouka's head, who's latched onto his legs and is burying her face in his side. At their feet is Kyouka's own still open flip-phone playing a dial tone. Dazai looks back over at him. "Welcome home, Chuuya."

He lets the body in his arms drop. The man slumps to the ground, unconscious, and Chuuya stumbles over him and makes his way over to the corner of the room on shaky legs.

Beside Dazai and Kyouka who were protected by the now-vanished Demon Snow, are the Akutagawa siblings. Rashoumon is out and bearing its maw at the world, and littered around Ryuunosuke is no small amount of crushed and misshapen bullets and shells. Gin, who'd been the one to call out to Chuuya first, is now wiping a knife as long as her forearm with the bottom of her shirt. And behind them all, are a huddled group of five children, all teary-eyed and blotchy-faced, but utterly unharmed.

"Oh my god," Chuuya says, but his voice comes out choked.

He staggers forward and collapses onto his hands and knees.

Chuuya counts his breaths, inhales deeply and exhales slowly, and small feet appear in his blurring vision as the kids run to him.

"Chuu-nii," Sakura sobs, crawling under his arms and onto his lap. The rest follow, clinging to his neck and arms and chest, crying and rubbing snot all into his shirt, and Chuuya squeezes his eyes shut and puts his arms around all of them.

He knots his fists into the backs of Katsumi and Yu's shirts, buries his face into Kousuke's hair and tells Shinji, "Hey, hey, it's alright now, it's alright."

"I— I was so sc-scared," someone cries, too-loud in his ear, and Chuuya nods and holds in his own tears.

"I know. You're okay now though, you're fine."

Chuuya glances up, at the pocked ceiling as he tries to will his watery eyes away, and glimpses Kyouka still trembling against Dazai's side. He nods at her to come closer, and when she cautiously steps within distance, reaches out to take her arm and pull her into the group hug.

“You okay?”

Kyouka starts to nod, then hesitates. Chuuya lets go of her arm to rub her back.

“It’s okay if you’re not,” he says, then has to blink hard and sniffle.

Slowly, Kyouka’s face crumbles. Eyebrows furrowing and lower lip trembling. She nods again, this time more shakily, and grips his shoulder hard enough that her nails pinch his skin. Yu, still crying, latches his arms around her instead, and Katsumi follows suit.

“Wh-where’s Oda-san?” Shinji asks, voice breaking.

Chuuya’s saved from answering that he doesn’t actually know when Ryuunosuke comes over and says, “He should be back tonight.” Chuuya looks up to see the other standing over them, hair falling over his face. There’s blood splattered on the sleeves of what is, unfortunately, his hoodie from Dazai.

“He told you that?”

“When he called to warn us about this.”

Chuuya nods, then carefully pries himself out of the huddle of kids on the floor and stands, wiping his arm over his eyes.

“Sorry about not answering your calls, Chuuya-san. We didn’t—”

Chuuya pulls him into a hug.

Ryuunosuke splutters, and Chuuya gestures over his shoulder to call Gin over and pull her in too.

“Thanks, you two,” he says. “You did amazing, keeping everyone safe. Just.... thank you so much.”

“It’s— we— well a-alright,” Ryuunosuke settles on, and Chuuya laughs a little, unsteadily. Gin does too and hugs him back just as fiercely.

Chuuya lets go after a minute too long and finally, makes his way back to Dazai.

His arms are held loose at his sides, and his smile, meaningless right now, is still in place. “See, not everything goes to hell the moment you leave,” he says.

“And thank god for that.” Chuuya flexes his hands into fists.

“Thank me, more like.” Dazai’s mouth lifts higher on one side, into a smirk that Chuuya can tell he isn’t feeling. “This was all thanks to my genius quick-thinking skills, making a barricade and all. You don’t have to worry so much.”

“Can’t you ever shut up?”

“Only if you make me,” Dazai teases, and his expression turns sincere.

Chuuya steps forward, and lunges.

Dazai's eyes widen and he flinches back. Chuuya digs his hands into the back of Dazai's neck and shoulder blades, bending him over like a bowing tree and crushing their chests together. He props his chin on Dazai's shoulder and buries his face into the underside of the other's jaw.

"Holy shit," he whispers into the small space, but it comes out more like a whimper. "Holy *fucking shit*."

"Chuuya?" Dazai lifts his hands and cautiously, slowly wraps them around his partner too. His fingers bury into the fabric of Chuuya's shirt, and knock against his trembling back.

"Shit," He says, and then, voice flayed, "Dazai, I was so scared, so fucking scared."

"Hey," Dazai murmurs, soft and turned into the crown of Chuuya's head. "It's okay now, no one's hurt."

"But I thought they'd be. I kept thinking— I kept *seeing them*, everyone all dead, I was *terrified*—"

"No one's dead," Dazai says firmly. "Not on your watch, and not on *our* watch. This isn't what happened a few years ago."

Chuuya's heart clenches.

Dazai sighs into his hair and slides his arms around Chuuya's back, pulls him in even closer and tighter. Resettles his cheek on top of Chuuya's head. "It's fine to still not be okay, but today isn't the same as the Dragon's Head Conflict or anything else."

Chuuya presses his eyelids to Dazai's neck, sees only blackness and feels the fluttering of a pulse through the thin skin. "Dazai…."

"Whatever happens," he says, and runs a hand up and down Chuuya's arm, leaving goosebumps in its trail, "we'll handle it together."

It takes another few hours to keep the kids calm and get their home livable again. Chuuya leaves Ryuunosuke and Gin to look after the kids while he floats bodies out the front door and dumps them in the cars outside. Dazai does his part by terrifying some of the gradually-waking men into driving back to headquarters to send Mori a message, and then the two of them start scrubbing the walls and floors free of dried blood.

As inconvenient as it was for Chuuya to fly multiple streets away to grab extra mops and bleach, he's still grateful the area where they live is fairly isolated so that no one was around to call the police in on the sound of gunshots.

When they finally have everything cleaned out and the bedsheets all changed, Chuuya flies out again and comes back with half a dozen pizza boxes for dinner. They all crowd together in the living room, sitting on the couch that needs desperately to be replaced and trying to urge each other into eating dinner. Kyouka and Yu can barely get anything down, and Chuuya has to hand-feed Sakura little, torn-off pieces of cheese.

"Let's just get you guys into bed," Dazai sighs and says eventually, once it's clear that everyone feels just a little too nauseous to eat more than a couple boxes total.

The kids all try to pile together onto one bed, even though it's not quite big enough for that, so Chuuya brings over a mattress from the other room and somehow manages to squeeze both into the small space together.

"You guys want a bedtime story?"

Kousuke shakes his head. "I want to stay up until Oda-san comes back."

Chuuya and Dazai exchange a glance.

"I'm sure OdaSaku would be happier if you all got some rest. You don't want to worry him by staying up and getting tired, right?"

Kousuke hesitates. "No, but…."

"I want to see Oda-san too," Yu whines, in a way that makes it clear he's sleepy and irritated about that fact.

"We can't just bring him here right now," Ryuunosuke says, frustration seeping into his voice enough that Chuuya can tell he's close to the end of his patience.

"Why can't you just call him," Kousuke tries again.

Gin hops onto the bed and tries to explain by saying "It might not be safe to," which just makes things worse.

"Why isn't it safe?" Shinji shoots up from where he was laying, and his head whips from person to person worriedly. "Is Oda-san not safe?"

Katsumi, who'd been quiet so far, pulls his blanket up to his chin and asks, in a small voice, "Is Oda-san going to die too?"

"No! No, no way," Chuuya says. "He's safe, you guys, alright? He just can't be here right now."

"You're lying," Katsumi accuses, and sniffs. His eyes shine wetly.

"I'm not," Chuuya says, even though he might be for what little he knows right now. He looks over at Ryuunosuke and Gin only to find they're both already watching him. Chuuya takes a deep breath, trying to sort through things to say, when Dazai speaks.

"Katsumi-kun," he says, voice even and measured. "OdaSaku won't die. And I'm *not* lying, because I know what his special ability is. You guys haven't even seen it, right?" He tilts his head innocently and looks around the room, to all the kids slowly nodding their heads.

Dazai holds one finger up. "OdaSaku's power lets him see into the future. You know what that means? It means he can't get hurt."

"But—"

Dazai wags the finger, and shakes his head at Katsumi. "No buts here. OdaSaku will be *fine*. He can't be here right now because he has some things he needs to do to keep protecting all of you, but he'll be completely okay. You guys don't need to worry about anything. All you need to do, is *go. To. Sleep*."

“You’re sure about this?” Shinji asks, quiet.

“I’m sure. Now please, try your best to at least take a nap.”

There’s the sound of some grumbles, but most everyone settles under their respective blankets at that. Chuuya sighs and goes to turn off the light, and Ryuunosuke and Gin offer to stay in the room a while if he— and Dazai, Gin says, gaze flicking between them oddly— want to wait outside.

The first thing Chuuya does when out of the bedroom is fill a large glass with tap water. Seeing the kids almost break down reformed a lump of emotion in his throat. He chugs the glass and then another, before finally setting it away and clearing his throat.

“So,” he starts, and makes his way out of the kitchen. “Nice speech back there or whatever.”

Dazai falls onto the couch and calls back, “Can’t believe the hatrack still has a hard time giving me compliments, even after all this.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes, and walks over. He braces his forearms on the back of the couch to see Dazai laying on his back, picking at exposed foam from the gash in the couch, messing with little chunks of it.

Dazai looks up when Chuuya leans over him. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chuuya says, and watches the way Dazai’s fingers dig into the foam, pulling out bits and scratching at the outside, until the chunks turn fluffy and unravelled. He presses his lips together and says, finally, softly, “Thanks.”

Dazai’s fingers still, all lithe bones held stiff like frozen spider limbs. A beat passes, until he says, “Well, it looked like you were a little lost, and someone had to be the responsible one.”

“You can read me that well now?”

“....Isn’t it natural after all this time? Besides, I’m sure the other’s could tell that you still seemed— shaken up, after what happened.”

“Still.” Chuuya closes his eyes briefly and takes a breath. “Dazai.”

He opens his eyes and finds Dazai’s face, looking up at him with brown eyes wide and brows raised, bangs spilled messily across his forehead. Measured, he says, “yes?”

“I… about everything—”

Dazai is watching him patiently. Chuuya forces himself to get the words out, something not unlike urgency building in his chest.

“One of the things,” he tries instead, “that I was most afraid of today, was that I’d come back and you would be dead.”

Dazai laughs a little, dryly. “Well, I’m not. And I already knew that.”

Chuuya shakes his head. “No, not like that. Or yes like that but— I was *so scared of that*. For you specifically. I thought— I thought that if you died, that’d be it, because—”

Chuuya lets out a frustrated sound and rubs a hand down his face, which feels so hot now from all the blood rising up to it.

“Don’t strain yourself,” Dazai says, but there are nervous fissures running through the amusement in his voice.

“You made sure everyone was okay, alright, and when I got here I was so relieved. And I thought, on the way here, that I’d do anything. For you to—” Chuuya bites his lip so hard it bursts and meets Dazai’s eyes, all wide rings of dark where it’s impossible to distinguish the brown of iris from the black of pupil. “For you,” he finishes.

Dazai stares at him unspeaking and unmoving for so long that Chuuya feels abashment diffusing all through him. It’s like he can see the gears in his head turning, nimble and rapid.

When he finally speaks, Dazai asks in so frail and faint a voice that Chuuya can barely hear it, “And you figured this out now? Because of what happened today?”

Chuuya nods lamely.

“And you’ve decided that I should know?”

Another nod.

Slowly, Dazai’s eyebrows furrow, slanting down as his nose wrinkles and his lips purse. “You have awful timing,” he announces.

Chuuya nods again, because it’s true.

But he’d felt a bit like he’d been vibrating from the inside out, like the words rising in his chest had grown wings like butterflies and needed to be freed.

“You don’t have anything more to say for yourself?”

Chuuya crosses his arms on top of the couch and buries his face in them.

There’s a sigh, and a shuffling sound, and a cool hand on his elbow.

“Hey—” Dazai starts, and his voice is so close to his ear it tickles and makes Chuuya shiver. He waits for the other to continue, but then he hears from further away, “Is something wrong?”

Chuuya lifts his head and looks over his shoulder to see a small shape standing in the doorway. “Kyouka-chan?” he asks.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she mumbles. “I wanted Dazai-san to use his ability on my phone.”

Dazai sighs but says, “Of course,” and gestures at her to come over. Chuuya turns back around to see Dazai sinking from his knees where he’d just been, and without thinking, follows the hand that falls from his elbow down until he’s holding cold fingers in his palm.

Dazai glances back up at him, not quite startled and not quite suspicious, but Chuuya pulls his hand away like he’s been burned. Dazai looks at him like he wants so badly to say something, but holds his tongue while Kyouka comes around to sit on the other cushion of the couch, right over the slash mark, and hands him her flip-phone.

Dazai wraps his fingers around it and holds it tightly, the faint blue light of No Longer Human enveloping it.

“Did you have a nightmare,” Chuuya asks Kyouka, and when she only nods, “Do you want to talk about it or be distracted from it?”

She hesitates, eyes reflecting the blue glow, before asking, “Can we turn on the TV?”

Chuuya has to search for the TV remote since he hadn’t thought to find it while cleaning a few hours ago, but once he has it he puts on some nature show from the DVR so he doesn’t subject a 10-year-old to late-night game shows.

Kyouka perches on the edge of the couch, legs pulled up to her chest and phone back around her neck. Chuuya sits on the floor in front of her and tries to pay attention to the animals on-screen instead of looking back over to Dazai every minute.

It’s a poor pattern, and one that Kyouka interrupts by saying, “My nightmare was about Demon Snow.”

“Oh yeah?” Dazai prompts.

Kyouka wraps her arms around her legs. “She was the one attacking us today instead.”

Chuuya turns to face her fully. “Your own ability wouldn’t do that,” he says, in an attempt to assure her.

She shakes her head, eyes still on the TV. In a surprisingly strong voice, she announces, “Demon Snow killed my parents.”

Chuuya freezes. He looks over to Dazai, who looks equally stunned.

“Kyouka-chan,” Chuuya starts, but she cuts him off.

“I hate Demon Snow. I can’t control it. But I can’t get rid of it, so…. I want you to help me use it.”

“Hey now,” Dazai says, “You don’t need to be fighting right now, you’re still a kid.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not about fighting, I just want to be able to use it. I hate her, but she helped us today. Demon Snow is my ability and I want to be in charge of it.”

It’s clear that she’s resolute in her conviction, so Chuuya rubs a hand down his face and relents. “If we help you, you need to listen to us about what to do and try to stay safe, okay?”

“I know,” she says, and finally turns to look at him. “So are you going to?”

Chuuya glances back at Dazai one last time before meeting Kyouka’s eyes. He might regret this later but— “Yeah, alright.”

Kyouka falls asleep like that on the couch and Chuuya almost does too, when he hears the front door open. Or rather, when he hears it scrape against the floor as it’s pushed aside from where he leaned it against the doorway.

He stands from the floor and follows Dazai blearily, only to see two figures stumbling over each other into the front room.

It's like a jolt goes through him at the sight, and Chuuya jogs over, relief flooding him, and levers his shoulder under Oda's other arm, who smiles down at him while blood draws a river down his face from a cut at his cheek. His hair is matted, dark and stuck to his temples, and he smells of smoke and sweat. Most of his body and clothes, from what Chuuya can see, is covered in cuts and scrapes that look like grazes from bullets.

Sakaguchi looks better off beside him, though he's got his fair share of nicks and bruises as well. "Thank you," he says, glasses falling at an angle off his face, and then repeats himself when Dazai drags the beanbag chair closer to the foyer so he can dump Oda onto it.

Oda hisses as he goes down, and Sakaguchi collapses next to him on the floor.

Chuuya wants nothing more than to demand what the hell happened today, but Dazai's looking at them both with barely concealed fear and worry, so he mutters out something about getting the first aid kit before leaving them to talk amongst themselves.

When he comes back, however, it looks like they'd been waiting for him before answering any questions.

"There was an organization," Oda says, watching as Dazai and Chuuya are slowly disinfecting and bandaging his wounds, "that Mori assigned me to take out a few days ago. They called themselves Mimic and the leader was searching for someone to kill him."

"So, did you?"

Oda startles and his gaze focuses on Dazai.

"Did you kill him," Dazai asks again, and Oda hesitates for a beat too long before Sakaguchi speaks.

"I did."

Another short silence, and then Dazai's mouth curls wryly. "This should be a fun story."

It turns out, what happened is the following: Mori sent Oda to take down Mimic, and then sent people to kill his children in an effort to motivate him to go on a death quest where he and Andre Guide, the leader of the organization, would both go down together. Oda had learned about Mori's plan just before it'd been put into effect thanks to Sakaguchi informing him after negotiating the information out of Kouyou.

And Oda had been working with Sakaguchi because he'd had to rescue him from a staged hostage situation earlier, since he was, in effect, a triple agent. Sakaguchi had come back to Oda later out of guilt to explain to him, and also out of fear of what would happen to his children.

In the end, Sakaguchi had made his way into Mimic's hideout, following the trail of bodies left in Oda's wake, before finding him and Guide locked into a fight that should have been impossible to win due to both of them having the same ability. Or a fight that would have been impossible to win, if a third party hadn't arrived in secret and shot Guide dead straight through the cerebellum.

“I have to say that your no-kill doctrine made things harder than they should have been,” Sakaguchi is saying, “so many of those Mimic members kept trying to reach for their guns to shoot me, or kept asking me to just kill them instead.

“Sorry,” Oda says, but tilts his head all the way back to rest it against the crown of the chair. His mouth pulls up at the corners. “Thank you for the help, though.”

“Of course,” Sakaguchi says, and pushes his glasses up higher. “I couldn’t just leave you all to die after— what I found out.”

“True,” Dazai hums, and unlike Oda’s his smile has an edge. “The fact that you kept that secret for this long is concerning though. You’re the one who would’ve been putting people in the most amount of danger.”

Sakaguchi stiffens. Chuuya nudges Dazai with an elbow, but his sharp smile stays in place.

“I know,” Sakaguchi admits after a moment, “And I am deeply sorry for that. It wasn’t ever my intention to harm any of you. If you want to cut off ties at this point I understand.”

“An appealing offer,” Dazai says, and this time Chuuya reaches out and squeezes his arm. “....But it looks like there are people here who don’t care as much as I go about that potential harm.”

“You’re an ass,” Chuuya mutters, and Dazai cuts his gaze back over to him.

“Not that you care much,” he says pointedly, and Oda clears his throat above them.

“It wouldn’t exactly be possible for me to cut ties if I wanted to,” he says, “which I don’t.” And then looks over at Sakaguchi. “I was offered a position, and I agreed to take it.”

“You’re leaving the mafia?” Dazai asks, sounding mildly stunned.

Oda nods, and it’s Sakaguchi who explains, “The Special Abilities Department has ties with a new detective agency that’s scouting for members. Being a part of them is protection enough from Mori’s influence, and our head agreed to scrub some records in exchange for something like this that might be considered… community service.”

“It seems like they’ll take just about anybody with an ability,” Oda says, looking straight at them.

“You want us to join?” Chuuya asks.

He shrugs. “It’ll pay better than part-time.”

“What if I don’t want to do any work?” Dazai whines. “I’m not fit for the law anyway.”

“This is far from police work,” Sakaguchi says. “And you don’t have to do it. It’s just one option if you need a full-time job and want to help some people along the way.”

Dazai breathes out heavily and tips his head back. “What does the hatrack want to do?”

Chuuya startles, but thinks about it some more. A better paying job would be nice, and if what Sakaguchi said about being protected from Mori that way is true, then it would make things like having assault squads sent into their own homes hopefully null. And, if there were different kinds

of ability users there, he might be able to find someone who could help Kyouka control Demon Snow.

“Chuuya?” Dazai asks again, once he’s taken too long to deliberate, and pokes him in the cheek.

Chuuya swats his hand away and shrugs. “Sure. It’ll pay better than part-time,” he says, parroting Oda’s words.

Dazai stares at him for a moment then sighs. “Tell me why I already knew that you’d agree.”

“Does that mean both of you are in?” Sakaguchi asks.

Dazai leans his palm on his hand and says, finally, “Alright. I go where my diminutive partner goes, after all.”

It’s 3am once Oda’s all bandaged up and they’ve each had a few slices of cold pizza. Oda goes to check on his kids and finds them all asleep, tangled up together on the sheets with Ryuunosuke and Gin. Sakaguchi and he take what’s normally the Akutagawas room to catch a few hours of rest before sunrise, and after Chuuya carefully carries Kyouka back to the kid’s room and nestles her in the last leftover space between Sakura and the wall, Dazai and he do the same.

Chuuya lies flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling that has crumbling off-white paint, and tries not to let all the events of the day flood his mind and catch him in a storm of rumination. The only sound in the room is from the adjoined bathroom as Dazai washes his hands. Chuuya covers his eyes with his forearm, too tired to go and turn off the lights.

The two of them are the only ones awake in the house at this point, and inevitably, Chuuya’s thoughts wander back to his fear at thinking he’d lose Dazai, and his own words to the other earlier. It’s not that he regrets what he’d said, because it’s true and he’d felt at the moment like there wasn’t anything else more important than Dazai *knowing*.

Knowing, that Chuuya would do anything for him, that Chuuya would go to the ends of the earth for him, that he *cares* about him.

No, he doesn’t regret saying it out loud because over the past couple of years, Chuuya’s gotten used to relying on Dazai just a little bit, and to being honest with him, but *fucking hell* if it wasn’t incredibly embarrassing in hindsight.

Chuuya groans in despair, then jumps when a voice says, too close for comfort “Aw, what’s wrong; did you miss me?”

Chuuya removes his forearm and looks up at Dazai, who’s wearing a soft grin and is propped up over him, upside down. His hair hangs down around him like some dark halo, all messy and wild, and something mischievous sparks in his eyes.

“As if,” Chuuya responds, and Dazai only tuts.

“You say that like you didn’t tell me that you’d be lost without me earlier.”

“I didn’t say it like *that*,” Chuuya insists, looking off to the side. He’s not quite sure why he’s trying to cover for himself at this point, honestly, but it might just be a habit associated with that damn

expression on Dazai's face.

"But you did say it," Dazai insists. Chuuya jolts when cold fingers brush his side.

He shivers, and is about to say something about it when Dazai's hand rises higher, skimming over his side, and even through the fabric of his shirt he's suddenly hyper-aware of the sensation. Dazai's touched him so often before, but it's different now, for some reason, with the realization from earlier, and it saps the words right out of his throat.

Dazai's fingers settle over Chuuya's own hand resting on his stomach, and tangle into his own fingers, a criss-cross pattern of cool and warm.

"Hey," Chuuya says in only the barest likeness of a protest, and his words fail him yet again when he looks up and sees Dazai above him, staring at him with such intensity, dark brows furrowed, eyes gone from chocolate to night. Dazai licks his lips, and because his face is angled in reverse to Chuuya's own, he can't help but track the movement. That's all it is, the position of Dazai's features above him.

And he's then moving, slowly, leaning down and across, and Chuuya can do nothing but stay still, transfixed.

Dazai lowers his mouth over Chuuya's own, until their lips are brushing, and Chuuya can feel every small, nervous breath Dazai puffs out on his own mouth.

And then he moves, feather-light against Chuuya's lips, airy and hesitant, and Chuuya's eyes flutter closed.

Dazai presses further, and his mouth goes from just moving lightly to more firmly, slowly placing one kiss after another against Chuuya's lips, until he starts moving too.

In one of the gaps of Dazai pulling away between kisses, Chuuya wets his lips and accidentally licks at another pair. Dazai's breath catches in his throat, and he makes a little noise that sends *something* through Chuuya, and then he's kissing back, pressing his lips against Dazai's more firmly, holding their mouths together for longer.

He might be trembling, a little. His entire body feels flooded with warmth, like candlefire flickering through him and melting all his bones, and his heart's beating in his chest like it has wings. He feels lightheaded, and the fire is starting to lick at his lungs too.

Dazai pulls away, breathing hard, and Chuuya has to gasp to catch his breath.

Chuuya stares up at him, stunned and reeling. "What was that?" he asks, strained and faint.

"My answer," Dazai says, watching at him with no less intensity, even after the kisses.

“What?”

“That was my answer to your confession, obviously.”

Chuuya looks at Dazai, who has pink dusted across his cheeks, and is looking at him in anticipation, and thinks back to exactly what he said. Slowly, still a bit disoriented, he says, “That wasn’t supposed to be a confession.”

“...oh.”

Dazai’s stilled above him, pulled his bottom lip up between his teeth. Chuuya watches it with interest, at the pink of it, and suddenly wants nothing more than to kiss it again.

“It could be,” he says. “If you wanted it to.”

The lip pops free from his teeth and Dazai tilts his head to the side. “Really?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t supposed to be a confession but— I—”

Dazai cuts him off with another kiss. Chuuya lifts his hands and tangles them into Dazai’s hair this time, relishes in the fire that spreads through his limbs, that crawls to his lungs between short gasps of muffled breath between them as they change angles and move their mouths against each other. Dazai lets out another soft sound and pushes him deeper into the mattress, fingers clenched so tight between Chuuya’s own that it hurts.

When he pulls away, after what feels like far too short a time, Chuuya has barely enough oxygen left to say, “I like you.”

“Finally,” Dazai says. “I’ve been waiting years to hear you say that.”

“*Years*?”

Dazai hums, and leans down to rub his nose against Chuuya’s, tender and soft. “I predicted we’d be fucking by last year but then— the Akutagawas happened.”

Chuuya chokes. “What the hell,” he cries out, strangled, and Dazai laughs against his cheek.

“You were supposed to be the first person to do this, you know. But you dragged your feet about it for so long that you made me do all the work.”

“All the work my ass,” Chuuya says. “I was the one who confessed.”

“And you just admitted it wasn’t supposed to be one. Really, Chuuya,” Dazai says, looking down at him with a smile that’s somewhere between mocking and terribly fond. “What were you trying to do there if it wasn’t your version of an awfully executed confession?”

“I don’t know! I just wanted you to know that I cared about you, okay? I didn’t think that far beyond the impulse.”

“That’s the difference between us,” Dazai notes, like he’s stating something solemn even though he’s smiling silly and twirling Chuuya’s hair between his fingers. “Be glad your partner isn’t as impulsive as you.”

“You can’t say that when you just interrupted me by kissing me for no reaso—”

It’s shorter this time, and lighter, and when Dazai pulls back he doesn’t even look smug, just happy.

“You need to stop doing—”

His lips are all soft and swollen at this point.

“*Dazai*,” Chuuya complains, as though he isn’t enjoying it just as much as the other party.

“Sorry,” and Dazai doesn’t look apologetic at all. “Your lip balm tastes good, by the way.”

Chuuya feels the blood rush to his face. “W-what even—” he stammers, and Dazai swoops in again.

He pulls away and licks his lips, faux-thoughtful expression in place. “Is it apple? Or maybe cherry?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know,” Chuuya says, and Dazai looks down at him, utterly disappointed.

“For shame, how do you *not* know what the things you bought are.”

Wait— “I put on lip balm this morning, you can’t even taste anything anymore, jackass.”

Dazai grins. “Took you long enough. I thought I’d have to keep kissing you all night until you figured it out.”

“You put some more on before bed, didn’t you?” Chuuya asks, and brings his hand to the nape of Dazai’s neck. “So maybe I’ll be the one that gets to figure it out.”

Dazai blinks at the statement, and then Chuuya brings him down. He kisses him hard, sliding their mouths against each other, and takes a lip in his mouth and sucks at it. When he lets go, breathless, Dazai is panting and a little dazed. Chuuya licks his own lips to taste the residue that he’d kissed off.

“Vanilla?”

Dazai shakes his head. “Honey.”

“Why’d you tell me before I got it right,” Chuuya asks, and can’t help but smile, a little sharp and a little self-satisfied. “I could’ve kept kissing you all night.”

“As interesting of a prospect as that is,” Dazai comments, “The plan is *not* to let you have all the fun today. I’ll pen you in for a few days later in my schedule.”

Chuuya lets out a laugh. “Whatever. Kissing’s inconvenient when you’re upside-down like that anyway. Was that in the plan too?”

“Winged that part,” Dazai says, and then gets back up and falls, lets his weight free and tumbles over so he’s lying beside Chuuya on the bed, the right way.

Chuuya turns on his side, sees Dazai level with him, eye to eye and chest to chest and legs knocking against legs, mouth curved painfully sweet, and suddenly finds himself coming to embarrassing terms with the situation. He shuts his eyes tight and Dazai says, “A more recent addition to the plan is dating, by the way. Is your sort-of-confession worth that much?”

Chuuya opens his eyes again and sees Dazai, leaned in close enough to feel every breath on his own face. “I don’t have a calculator on me,” he murmurs, “but I’d say it’s worth more than enough.”

Dazai bridges the distance between them and kisses him again.

“Glad we’re getting all the paperwork settled,” Dazai says when he pulls away, and leans back in to give him another peck on the lips, and another, and another.

Chuuya brings his arms up and curls his hands around Dazai’s face, holding him near.

There’s no sound but the soft breathes and smack of lips between them, and the dim buzzing of the lights in the room, and he loses track of how long it goes on like that.

“We need to be up tomorrow,” someone says, and someone else, “it’s getting late,” but it just devolves into pulling each other closer and slanting mouths against the other’s and feeling warmth melt through their limbs.

“We should go to bed,” Chuuya says reluctantly.

“Just one more kiss,” Dazai bargains, and he relents, just as eager.

“Fine, one more.”

As expected, it doesn’t end up being just one more kiss.

Chapter End Notes

putting my thank you note up here since i have so much meta for this au and i will be spilling some below: i was floored at the amount of positive feedback i got for this fic throughout each and every chapter, whether you were here from the beginning or just dropped in, thanks to everyone who stuck around for this whole thing and finished reading! <3

(also, i am thinking about possibly making a one-shot sequel to this set in the guild arc where ada!skk sort of adopt Q/kyuusaku, since i couldn’t get them out of the port mafia in this fic so…. if anyone would be interested in that do me a solid and lmk pls) EDIT: that sequel has now been made, as seen by the fact that this work is now part of a series. thank you for everyone who encouraged me to go through with it!

alright, so, meta: there are still some character threads left unresolved but i imagine that after they join the ada, chuuya’s able to rely on dazai much more readily because he gets to see/remember how much dazai thrives in an environment where he can use his mind and also fight, and bc there's suddenly a legal safety net to fall back into for support (not to mention the huge plethora of adults and other ability users they’d have on their side)

and in case anyone's curious, dazai's POV in terms of his feelings towards chuuya went like this—

ch1: confusedly and almost bitterly thinks a part of the reason chuuya would abandon everything for him could only be bc he liked dazai and wanted something from him; starts feeling better about/ enjoying having run away at that point so figured he'll "give chuuya what he wants" and starts flirting with him

ch2: dazai figured out a timeline that he was going to "let chuuya romance him"; started developing feelings but wasn't aware of it

ch3: realized he liked chuuya and started flirting with him to see if chuuya would respond, and also to prompt him into doing something; still under the assumption that chuuya liked him romantically though not thinking bad of him about it (somewhat right since chuuya started developing softer, more romantic feelings around here)

ch4: started to get sick of chuuya not letting him in enough, but working on it with him; at this point in too deep for it to even effect his incessantly romantic feelings

anyway yeah.... thanks again for reading ashjdhglslgs;;

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